

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK

MYSTERY

NOVEMBER ISSUE '92

MAGAZINE



DOUBLE  
ISSUE

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## EDITOR'S NOTES

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# **EDITOR'S NOTES**

**by Dr. Narendra Choudhry**

**H**ere we are again, as promised, with the second Double Festival issue of HITCHCOCK, bringing you another harvest of selected high class intelligent reading entertainment, the best we could offer.

The AHMM was founded in 1956 by master of mysteries of this century -- ALFRED HITCHCOCK. So, with this issue we celebrate 36th year of Publication. Since then, it has been persistent effort of the editors of this magazine, even after the death of the great genius, to provide clean and intelligent reading material to readers, to match and fulfill his saying -- "*chilling tales of mystery and suspense -- sometimes humorous, sometimes nightmarish, but always an intriguing puzzle.*"

It has been a good thirty-six years. We haven't made an exact count, but we know it represents many more than four thousand spine-tingling stories of crime and suspense published during that time. In the last two and a half years that this Editor has been putting the Asian Edition togather, a good time has certainly been had by all; we hope our current readers have been as gratified as we are by the selection of stories that have flowed into these pages.

The entertainment and suspense and sometimes downright scary stuff comes, of course, from both established writers and new ones. We always have latest stories from super mystery writers, like, as in this issue, Dan Crawford, Rob Kantner, Jack Ritchie, Bill Prinzini, Martin Limon, Robert Halsted and others. Incidentally this issue is crowded with old and established writers from all over the world. We have the honour of having three most interesting stories from great story teller Jack Ritchie in this issue.

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We should also note that Josephine Bell is new to this magazine, too, though she is writer of forty-five best selling crime novels and several hundred short stories. However "Miss Chandler's Mistake" is her last story, appearing first time in these pages.

In short, it's been another fascinating four weeks at the office, to prepare and collect these chilling tales for your long winter nights.. So, have a good and prosperous DIWALI HOLIDAYS by having best of time with your HITCHCOCK.

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# Free-lance Operation

by Bill Pronzini

Carmody reached St. Mark's Square, the commercial, artistic, and tourist hub of Venice, just past five of a warm Friday afternoon in September, and took a table at one of the open-air cafes on the piazzetta. He ordered a cup of cappucino and sat looking out on the wide basin into which the city's two major canals, the Grand and the Giudecca, emptied. The falling sun streaked the water in silver, reflected off the hulls of gondolas, water taxis, passenger ferries, and small commercial craft that dotted its surface.

Fifteen minutes had passed when Della Robbia came out of the swarm of tourists and pigeons flocking the square and sat down across from him.

Carmody said, "Well?"

"The boat has been arranged," Della Robbia answered. He was young and dark and relaxed, and he wore a light gray suit, benchmade shoes, a pair of very dark glasses. He spoke careful, British-accented English.

"Where do I meet it?"

"The Rio di Fontego, at the foot of Via Giordano."

"Ten o'clock?"

"Just as you requested."

"What did you tell the driver?"

"Nothing that he did not need to know."

"Does he speak English?"

"Enough to understand simple directions."

"Can he be trusted?"

"Yes."

"All right," Carmody said. "You'll get your commission when I get paid. Figure a week."

"Bene," Della Robbia said, smiling, and got to his feet. "Good luck, Signor Carmody."

When Della Robbia had disappeared into a crowd of sightseers gathered before the Ducal Palace, Carmody lighted one of the short, thin, black cigars he liked. He smoked it down slowly, and then stood and gave several lire notes to a passing waiter. Lean, almost predatory, Carmody moved with a smooth, liquid grace. He had leather-tan features, flat green eyes, and shaggy graying-black hair; a sardonic mouth made him look faintly satanic. As he started away, a young microskirted Italian girl sitting at one of the tables smiled invitingly at him. Carmody ignored her; when he

was working, he gave no thought at all to playing.

He walked east to a renovated sixteenth century palace which now served as one of the more fashionable hotels along the Grand Canal. In his room there, he spread a map of Venice open on the double bed and located the Rio di Fontego, one of the city's four hundred canals, and Via Giordano. He traced a water route from there to the Rio San Spirito, where Valconazzi had his hideaway, and saw that the distance was no more than half a mile. If the driver Della Robbia had recruited knew his business, it should take them no longer than thirty minutes to traverse the maze of small *rii* which dotted the area. Figure fifteen minutes to get Valconazzi and his woman into the boat, and another hour or so to get into and out of the Venice lagoon; the boat that would take them to Trieste would be at the rendezvous point in the Adriatic gulf at exactly midnight. It all seemed to dovetail nicely.

Carmody refolded the map, put it away, and made himself a drink from the array of bottles on a silver cart provided by the management. Then he went to the telephone, gave the switchboard a number.

A moment later Valconazzi's thick, atonal voice said guardedly, "Yes? What is it?"

"Carmody. We're set."

There was an audible expulsion of breath. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight. Be ready at ten thirty."

"I have been ready for the past three days," Valconazzi said. "A man cannot be any more ready than I am."

"Ten thirty," Carmody said again, and rang off.

He went to the bed with his drink and lay down and looked at the high Renaissance ceiling, thinking about Valconazzi and the job that had brought him to Venice four days previously. Valconazzi was, or had been, a smuggler who dealt in the lucrative commodity of cigarettes. The Italian government has a monopoly on the manufacture and sale of all tobacco products, and imposes a high duty on the import of American and English brands. Since most Italians prefer the imported to the raw homemade variety, and the demand grows greater every year, tons of contraband cigarettes are smuggled annually into the country. Valconazzi's operation was one of the largest in the northern provinces. He'd had cigarettes coming into Venice from Trieste, across the gulf, and down from Switzerland—and a fleet of trucks and men to distribute them throughout Italy. Then the Guardia di Finanza,

the agents of the ministry that runs the monopoly for the government, had descended with a series of recent raids that left Valconazzi's operation hurting and vulnerable.

One of the other dealers, a long-time rival of Valconazzi's named Lambresca, had seen his chance to take over and had made two unsuccessful elimination attempts. With the Guardia di Finanza and the Venice *carabinieri* breathing down his neck on one side, and Lambresca and his group closing in on the other, Valconazzi had been forced to abandon his palatial house on Lido Island, along with most of his possessions, and to go into hiding. Rita, his mistress of several years, had gone with him.

Ordinarily he would have been able to get out of Italy on his own, especially in view of the fact that he had amassed a considerable fortune in smuggling profits which he was able to take with him; but the heat was particularly heavy from both legal and illegal sources, and he had been afraid to trust former friends and allies and afraid to chance any escape routes known to him. That was why he had thought to bring in Carmody.

Carmody was a free-lance bodyguard, a man with connections that reached into every country in the free world—and

some of those behind the Iron Curtain. He had a reputation for results, and for complete trustworthiness that was unequaled by any individual or organization operating in or out of Europe. As a result of that reputation, the always desperate, always well-heeled men and women with whom he dealt were more than willing to pay the somewhat exorbitant fees he charged for his services.

Having heard of Carmody, Valconazzi knew that in order to set up a meeting with him he would have to go through one of Carmody's contacts. The long time contact for Carmody in the Venice area was a man named Piombo—but Piombo had made the mistake a month previously of getting himself shot by the *carabinieri* during an abortive art theft. Valconazzi had, instead, got in touch with Gino Della Robbia, one of Piombo's cohorts and heir-apparent to his contact position.

It had been two months since Carmody had last worked, and prolonged inactivity always made him restless, so he was receptive to the job when Della Robbia contacted him, and had flown directly to Venice. Valconazzi had called him at his hotel to tell him where the hide-away was—he had trusted no one, not even Della Robbia, with its location—and Carmody had

taken a careful, roundabout route to San Spirito. After talking to Valconazzi, and after the receipt of five thousand faith money, he had then gone to work setting up an escape network.

When the three of them arrived in Trieste tonight, there would be a plane to take them first to Spain and then to the island of Sardinia. Undetectably manufactured passports and other necessary papers would be waiting at the port of Cagliari. Once delivered safely there, Valconazzi was on his own; and Carmody would return to his home base on the Mediterranean island of Majorca five figures richer.

Carmody finished his drink, smoked another of the thin, black cigars, and then changed into dark trousers, a dark shirt, and a long leather jacket. He packed his single bag, went downstairs, and checked out of the hotel, leaving the bag in the care of the desk clerk. Then he walked into one of the narrow, carless interior streets, found a restaurant, and ate a leisurely dinner.

At nine o'clock he returned to the hotel, picked up his bag, and went into the lobby restroom. In one of the stalls, he removed the Beretta and the belt half-holster from the bag's false bottom and strapped the rig on under his jacket, where he could get at it

easily with his right hand if the need arose.

He left the hotel again and walked to one of the route stops for the passenger ferries, the Venice equivalent of municipal buses. He rode one up the Grand Canal, which divides the city in half, and disembarked at the stop near the ornately arched Rialto Bridge. After crossing the bridge, he checked the city map he had brought with him and then found his way easily to Via Giordano.

At the foot of the street was a set of stairs leading down into the black, sharply-odored waters of the Rio di Fontego. He waited there in the shadows, watching occasional black gondolas glide past, listening to the faint, pulsing sounds of water traffic on the Grand Canal.

It was one minute past ten when he heard the muffled throb of a boat engine. A moment later the launch—small and radio-equipped, like the water taxis—came along the *rio* and drifted over to the cement seawall. The man standing behind the wheel starboard was short and bearded, wearing a beret and a black turtleneck. He called softly, "Signor?"

Carmody looked back along Via Giordano, saw nothing, and came out of the shadows. Descending the three steps cut into the cement wall, he boarded the

launch and stowed his bag under the front seat. The driver studied him for a moment, then turned to the canal, waiting for instructions.

Carmody said, "Rio San Spirito. Number fifty-two. Can you find it?"

"San Spirito? Yes, I know it."

"Let's go, then."

The darkness was thick and blanketing in the narrow canals through which they maneuvered, and the small red and green running lights on the launch were often the only illumination. Carmody didn't expect company, but he watched astern just to make sure and saw nothing except an occasional wraithlike gondola gliding one way or another, in and out of the maze of waterways. Most of the ancient, decaying buildings along the *rio* were dark; even those that were occupied had shutters drawn across their oblong windows, allowing little light to escape. The silence, broken only by the gentle throb of the launch's inboard engine, was almost oppressive. So was the odor of garbage and salt water on the pleasantly cool, late summer air.

The bearded driver, silent and competent, took the launch through the twisting network of canals at what seemed to Carmody a snail's pace, but it was not even ten thirty when he

brought them into the black mouth of another canal and said, "San Spirito, signor."

"Fine," Carmody said. He looked for familiar landmarks, found one. "It should be the first building on the near side of that bridge ahead."

The driver nodded, cutting power, and eased the launch in close to the unbroken line of brick and cement walls on the right. They neared the small arched bridge that served as a span between two narrow streets, and Carmody pointed out the slender concrete platform beyond number fifty-two. When the launch had edged up to it, he jumped onto the platform.

"Wait here," he said to the driver. "And keep the engine running."

The canal door to the building that was Valconazzi's hideaway was at the near end of the platform, set into the right-angled corner between the *rio* and a high, chinked-brick garden wall. Carmody went to the door and used a corroded brass knocker; it made a hollow sound in the empty black stillness, but he knocked only one.

Valconazzi's voice said immediately, "Si?" He had been standing on the other side of the door, waiting.

"Carmody. Open it up."

There was the sound of a bolt being shot free, and then a key

turned in the old fashioned latch. The door edged inward. Carmody went inside, and Valconazzi was three feet away, with a small, blued-steel revolver in his hand. Behind him, through an archway, the lush brunette Rita stood poised as if for flight.

Carmody said, "Put the iron away," and moved down the short hallway, past Valconazzi and into the dimly lighted room where the girl was. His nostrils contracted, as they had on his previous visit, at the lingering odor of damp decay commingled with the fish and garbage reek penetrating from the canal outside. Three leather suitcases were on the floor next to a worn sofa; one of them—the largest—Carmody knew to contain the run-out money from which he would be paid.

Rita said, "We are leaving now?" in husky, broken English, and her eyes were huge and black in the dark cast of her face. She was tall and broad and enormous-breasted, like a Rubens nude, and if you liked your women that way, as Valconazzi obviously did, she was provocatively appealing. Carmody preferred small, petite women, and to him Rita seemed much too much of a good thing. At the moment she was nervous and either excited or afraid—the way she had seemed to Carmody be-

fore. She could not seem to keep her hands still.

"We're leaving now," he told her. "Let's get the bags out to the boat."

Valconazzi came into the room. Thick-necked and bearish, with a luxuriant black military mustache, he looked more like an Italian army colonel than a criminal on the run. "It seemed as if you would never get here tonight," he said. "This old house groans like an ancient, and I would jump at every sound."

Carmody said nothing, looking impatient, and Valconazzi went immediately to the bags and picked up two of them. Rita took the third, so that Carmody could keep his hands free. He preceded them to the door, opened it, and peered out; the launch sat silently against the concrete platform, the bearded driver standing over the wheel and looking back at the door. Carmody stepped out, motioning Valconazzi and the girl along, and while the suitcases were being handed into the launch and set down astern, he stood slightly apart from the others and looked both ways along the canal.

Rita said suddenly in Italian, "My cosmetic case. I left it inside." She stepped away hurriedly, starting back toward the still-open door to the building.

Her voice had seemed high and nervously shrill in the silence.

"Wait, Rita . . ." Valconazzi began, but she had her back to him, almost to the door now.

In that moment Carmody sensed, rather than saw, the first movement in the shadows beyond the bridge.

The muscles in his stomach constricted and he swept the jacket back and slid the Beretta out of its holster. The shadows seemed to separate, like an amoeba reproducing, and a formless shape edged away from the seawall, coming under the bridge. There was the faint pulsation of a boat engine.

Menace crackled like electricity on the cool night air, and Carmody shouted, "Valconazzi! Get down!" He dropped to one knee, sighting at the moving outline of the boat as it drew nearer, and fired twice. He heard bullets slap wood somewhere on the craft, and then a man-shape reared up at the wheel and the night seemed to explode in bright flashes, in chattering sound.

Valconazzi, startled by Carmody's sudden warning, had failed to react immediately. Now he screamed and wrapped both hands across his stomach, turned in a half-circle, and fell heavily into the launch's stern. In the same instant the bearded driver jerked straight up, hands outstretched as if imploring; then

he toppled sideways out of sight. Bullets sprayed the garden wall at the rear of the platform, whined off the concrete, thudded into the wooden hull of the launch.

Carmody thought: *Thompson gun*—and threw himself forward into the canal.

The water was chill and black, and he could taste the pollution of it, the harshness of oil and fish and garbage. He fought to keep from gagging and kicked straight down, at an angle across the narrow width of the *rio*. The Beretta was still in his hand, and he shoved it inside the waistband of his slacks before struggling out of the binding leather jacket. Swimming blind, groping ahead of him for the wall on the far side, he could feel pressure mounting rapidly in his lungs. Finally his fingers came in contact with the rough surface, and he crawled upward along it and poked his head out of the water, dragging air through his mouth, looking back.

The ambush boat had drawn alongside the launch, and the dark form of the machine gunner was frantically transferring Valconazzi's suitcases into his own craft with one hand, still holding the Thompson gun with the other. A long way off, somebody was shouting. There was intermittent light along the canal now, but not enough for

Carmody to determine if the boat held more than one man.

The machine gunner pulled the last suitcase aboard. Turning, he saw Carmody along the far wall, and the automatic weapon came up to his shoulder and began to chatter yellowly again. Chips of plaster and stone flew outward as the slugs scarred the wall, but Carmody was already beneath the canal's surface again, diving deeply and kicking straight across.

Above him, then, he heard the boat's engine grow abruptly loud, and he knew that the gunner was not wasting any more time; not with the area soon to be swarming with police craft. When he found the seawall and crawled up along it as he had done on the other side, the ambush boat was a dark blob just swinging out of San Spirito into another canal.

There were more lights on in nearby buildings, people with their heads pushed curiously between partially-opened shutters. Carmody swam to the launch, caught the port gunwale, and hauled himself into the craft. Valconazzi had been stitched across the abdomen with half a dozen bullets; the driver had been shot twice in the throat. The deck of the launch was slick with spilled blood.

Impotent rage made Carmody's temples throb wildly,

and his green eyes glowed like a cat's in the darkness. He looked under the front seat and saw that his own suitcase was still there. He pushed it onto the platform, climbed up after it, and ran with it to the door of number fifty-two. Inside, he went through the three downstairs rooms and two upstairs; the house was empty.

The woman, Rita, was gone.

Lips pulled back wolfishly from his teeth, Carmody went out a side door into a garden grown wild with lavender wisteria and white oleander. The windows of an adjacent building looked down into it, and a fat man in an undershirt stood framed in one, shouting angrily. Several large chestnut trees grew in the garden's center, and Carmody stayed in their shadow until he found a gate opening onto one of the narrow, twisting *calli* that mazed the area in much the same manner as the canals. He yanked it wide.

As he came running through the gate, a tall youth materialized from the darkness in front of him, waving his arms. Carmody lowered his shoulder and barreled into the youth and sent him sprawling against the garden wall. A woman's voice began cursing querulously in Italian some distance away. Carmody ran to the first corner, turned it into another street,

ran another block, rounded another corner and came out in a *campiello* with a small stone statue in its center.

He ducked around the statue and went into a slender black alley on the opposite side of the square. With his back against the cold stone wall, he watched the *campiello*. No one came into it, but he stayed where he was for several minutes, catching his breath, shivering inside his wet clothing. Then he moved deeper into the blackness, set his bag down, and worked the catches to open it.

*Rita*, he was thinking, *it had to have been Rita*. In addition to himself, the woman and Valconazzi were the only ones who knew about the San Spirito hideaway; and she had gone back to the house, out of the way, immediately before the shooting started. The way it figured, she had used the telephone in the house, when Valconazzi was in another of the rooms, and had tipped Lambresca—the smuggling rival who wanted Valconazzi's blood. Lambresca had told her how it would be done, about the ambush, and then he had sent his machine gunner to do the job. Her motivation was obvious enough: Valconazzi's run-out money—and maybe some personal reason, as well, that Carmody could not know about. In

any case, the money had to have been a primary consideration; the gunner had taken the time to fish the three suitcases out of the launch before getting the hell away from San Spirito.

Why had Rita done it that way? Why not just put a knife in Valconazzi at the house and simply walk out with the money? Or tip Lambresca off days sooner; they had been in the house for two weeks. Well, there were several possible explanations: she wasn't capable of committing murder herself; it had taken her the full two weeks to work up enough courage for the double-cross; Valconazzi had the money hidden in a place only he knew about. Whatever the reason, Rita was the Judas, all right . . .

While all of this was going through his mind, Carmody changed clothes in the darkness, putting on the jacket and shirt and slacks he had worn earlier in the day. The sodden things went into the suitcase, rolled into a towel. Then he left the alley and walked around until he found a neighborhood bar.

Locking himself in the restroom, he broke down the Beretta and cleaned and oiled it with materials from the false bottom of his bag. When he was satisfied that it was in working order, he moved out into the bar proper and drank two cognacs

to get the taste of the canal water out of his mouth.

There was a telephone on a rear wall. Carmody dialed Della Robbia's number, and the receiver was lifted on the sixth ring. He said, "Carmody. We had trouble. The whole thing's blown."

Silence; then Della Robbia said, "What happened?"

"We were ambushed. Valconazzi is dead. So's your launch driver. They were laying for us in a boat—one man with a machine gun that I'm sure about, maybe a backup. It was too dark to see much."

Della Robbia released a soft breath. "What about you?" he asked. "You are all right, signor?"

"Rum dandy," Carmody said. He was holding the phone receiver as if it were the machine gunner's neck. "Listen, it figures Valconazzi's woman is mixed up in the hit. She ducked off just before we were ambushed."

"But why would she—"

Carmody said, "I don't have all the answers yet, that's what I need you for. What do you know about this Rita?"

"Very little, signor."

"Was she ever involved in any way with a guy called Lambresca?"

"Valconazzi's rival? No, signor, not that I am aware. Do you

believe Lambresca helped arrange the ambush? That it was he and the woman?"

"That's right. Where do I find him, Della Robbia?"

"He has a wholesale vegetable dealership on Campo Oroglia, with living quarters above it. But, signor—"

"Get to work on the woman," Carmody said. "Dig me up a lead, use your connections. If I can't get anything out of Lambresca, I've got to have a starting point, some kind of direction. She's not going to get out of Venice—no way, you hear? Valconazzi is the first customer I ever lost, and I don't like it and I won't stand for it. I can't run my business letting somebody set up a customer and get away with it. Now get busy, and no nonsense."

"Just as you say," Della Robbia agreed hurriedly. "Where are you? Where can I—"

"I'll be in touch," Carmody said, and slapped the handset into its cradle.

There was nobody home.

Carmody stepped out from under the doorway arch and looked up once again at the sign running across the top of the closed front of the warehouse. It said A. LAMBRESCA in thick black lettering, and below that CAMPO OROGLIA 24. He let his gaze drift higher, to the barren eyes of the

windows strung along the second floor front. No sign of life. He had been there for five minutes, ringing bells and making noises like a drunk, his fingers restless on the butt of the Beretta in his jacket pocket. There had been no response of any kind, and it seemed obvious now that Lambresca was somewhere else on this night.

Out taking care of Rita, Carmody thought. Paying her off—or maybe double crossing her the way she double crossed Valconazzi, so he can keep the money for himself.

He looked at his watch; almost one thirty. The night was deep and silent, and there was a hollow, lonely echo to his steps as he crossed the square to enter the same street by which he had arrived. The rage inside him was thinly contained, screaming for an outlet.

He located a small hotel, gave the clerk a thousand lire note for the use of the telephone. Della Robbia answered almost immediately. Carmody said, "Well?"

"I have learned something," Della Robbia said, "but perhaps it means little or nothing."

"I'll decide that. What is it?"

"The woman has an uncle, a man named Salviati, who owns a *squero*—a boatyard for the repair and construction of gondolas. The uncle is said to have

smuggled contraband in the past, and so has several boats of high speed at his disposal. It is possible the woman has gone there, either because she wishes to leave the city or because she wishes to hide."

Carmody gave it some thought. It was possible, all right. Assuming it was the money that had prompted Rita to sell out Valconazzi, she might have gotten her payoff and made straight for her uncle's, for one of the two reasons Della Robbia had just suggested. She would need someone she could trust, and Lambresca was not necessarily that someone. Or she could have gone there immediately after leaving San Spirito, be waiting there now for Lambresca to bring the money.

He asked, "Where is this place, this *squero*?"

"On the Rio degli Zecchini. A water taxi can take you nearby, if you can find one at this hour of night."

"I can find one," Carmody said.

From where he stood in the shadows across the Rio degli Zecchini, Carmody could see the vague black shapes and skeletons of gondolas in the *squero*'s low-fenced rear yard. Set back fifty feet from the waterway was a two story wood and brick building that looked as if it had

been constructed in the time of the doges. It was completely dark. The area itself was relatively deserted, containing mostly warehouses. No light showed anywhere in the vicinity, save for a distant streetlamp beyond a bridge spanning the canal twenty yards to the left of Carmody's vantage point.

He put his suitcase into a shadowed wall niche, took the Beretta out of his jacket pocket—the sodden holster was in the bag—and held it cupped low against his right leg as he walked slowly to the bridge. On the opposite seawall, he stood listening for a moment. A ship's horn bayed mournfully out on the lagoon, but the interruption was only momentary in the dark, late night stillness.

The rear entrance to the *squero* was a wooden gate set into a three-quarter frame of two by fours; the other quarter was the brick wall of the adjacent building. On the canal side, and on top, the beams sprouted tangles of barbed wire like whiskers on an old man. Carmody had had experience with barbed wire before, but still he cut the palm of his left hand in two places while swinging in a humped, acrobatic position around the frame. The sharp sting of the cuts added fuel to the already white heat of his anger.

Moving quickly now, he made

his way across the yard, made ghostly by a faint shine from the half-moon overhead. The gondolas—long, slender, flat-bottomed, with tapered and upswept prow and stern—were laid out in rows, on davits, in stacks of two and three; they camouflaged his run to the far corner of the darkened wood and brick building.

Jalousied shutters were lowered tightly across a high, double-doored entrance, and there were no fronting windows. Carmody edged around the corner and along the side wall. An elongated window halfway down looked in on a solid screen of blackness—another dead end.

Carmody paused, peering toward the back. A high wall formed the rear boundary of the *squero*, but it was set several feet beyond the building, forming a narrow alley the width of it. He decided to make a complete circle of the structure before abandoning the grounds.

The rear passageway was cluttered with refuse. He picked his way carefully through it, looking for a window. Two-thirds of the width, he found one with louvered shutters closed across it. He went to it and squinted upward through one of the canted louvers: light; movement.

The muscles in Carmody's neck went taut, and he bent lower so that he could see more

of the room. It was an office of sorts. There was a desk containing a farrago of miscellany and a lighted gooseneck lamp, two wooden chairs, a table overflowing with charts and pamphlets, a filing cabinet with a rusted fan on top.

There was also the woman, Rita.

She stood to one side of the desk, in profile, nervously watching the closed door directly opposite the window. Her arms were folded tightly across her heavy breasts, as if she were cold, and she smoked a filter cigarette in short, agitated drags. Beneath the olive tone of her skin, her face appeared to be very pale.

Carmody retreated, his mouth a thin white slash. He went back the way he had come and stopped before the elongated and unshuttered window that looked into the front part of the building. It was the kind that open inward on a pair of hinges, with a simple slip catch locking it into the jamb. He went to work with the broad, flat blade of his pocketknife. After two minutes of silent, concentrated effort, he put the tips of his fingers against the streaked glass and cautiously pushed the window open.

The interior smelled of paint and linseed oil and dampness. Once inside, Carmody stood motionless on a rough concrete

floor, waiting for his eyes to become acclimated to the deep blackness; pretty soon he was able to identify a lathe, a drill press, a table saw, several wood forms. The wall that would contain the office door was in heavy shadow, but he knew approximately where the opening would be and he moved stealthily in that direction.

When he was ten feet away, he could make out the lines of the door. He stepped up to it, listening. She was quiet in there, and since she had been watching the door minutes earlier, it figured she was still watching it. He had no way of knowing whether or not she was armed; he had not seen a gun, but he had only had a limited view of the office. The door might be locked, too, but the wood was old and very dry; it would not take very long to kick it in. The element of surprise was all in his favor.

Carmody touched his left hand to the knob. Then, when he was ready, he twisted it hard to the right, moving his body forward. The door, unlocked, opened under his hand and he hit it with his left shoulder, bursting it wide, and went in very fast with the Beretta up and his body dipped into a fighter's crouch.

Rita screamed.

She stumbled backward, one hand going to her mouth, and

her eyes were like buttons threatening to pop from too much pressure. Carmody reached her in three long strides, caught her dark hair in his free hand, spun her around, and sat her down hard in one of the chairs. Immediately, he knelt in front of her and put the muzzle of the Beretta against her cheek, his tightly angry face less than six inches from hers.

He could see that she wanted to scream again, but there was no voice left in her. Her eyes began to roll up in their sockets. Carmody slapped her twice and her vision abruptly refocused, and she was out of the faint before she had really gone into it.

She stared at him with terrified shock. "Signor Carmody . . ."

"That's right—Carmody."

"But you . . . I thought . . ."

"I was luckier than Valconazzi," he said softly, thinly. "Have you been paid off yet, Rita? Where's the money?"

"Money? I have . . . no money. Please . . ."

"Come on, come on, you sold me out too when you sold out Valconazzi. Remember that."

"I do not understand—"

"The hell you don't understand."

"I was so afraid," she whispered. She was trembling now. "I did not wish to die. This is why I run away. I know nothing

about money, please, I know nothing!"

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't set up that ambush?"

"Ambush?"

"The boat, the machine gunner."

"No! How could I? You cannot think—"

"Why did you run back to the house just before the shooting started?"

"My *cosmeticos*. I forgot them."

"Sure you did."

"I tell the truth! Renzo was my man, we were going away together, you cannot think I would see him killed."

"Somebody saw him killed," Carmody said. "Somebody tipped Lambresca. And you and Valconazzi were the only ones besides me who knew where that hideaway was."

"No, no, no! I did not, I would not . . ."

She shook her head wildly, forgetting the gun at her cheek, and Carmody pulled the Beretta back slightly. It was momentarily silent in the office, and in that silence there was the sibilant but unmistakable sound of a footfall from the darkness at the front of the building. The hackles rose on the back of Carmody's neck, and out of the corner of his eye he could see the vague form of a man just outside the pool of light shining out through the open doorway. There

was something large and bulky held in both the man's hands, across the front of his body.

Carmody levered up in one fluid motion and threw himself to one side, pushing Rita and the chair over backward. She screamed again, thin and piercing, but it was a cry of fear rather than pain—a cry that was lost almost instantly in the stuttering roar of the Thompson gun. One of the sprayed bullets ripped the gooseneck lamp off the desk top and flung it down; the light went out and the office was plunged into total darkness, save for the bright flashes from the machine gun's muzzle.

Rolling frantically, Carmody managed to get the desk between himself and the doorway. He could hear the rap, rap, rap of the slugs digging into the desk, into the wall above him, as the gunner raked the enclosure with another burst. He twisted his body into the knee-hole, lying flat, and he could see, then, the muzzle flashes of the Thompson gun.

He steadied the Beretta on his left forearm and emptied most of the clip at a spot six inches above the bursts.

There was a half-strangled Italian oath, and abruptly the automatic weapon became silent; a moment later the metallic clatter of the machine gun on concrete and the sound of a

heavily falling body reached Carmody's ears. He remained motionless for several pulse-beats, but the only thing auditory in the heavy darkness was Rita's soft whimpering somewhere across the office.

Carmody crawled out of the knee-hole, got to his feet, and moved at an angle to the door. There was a pencil flash in his trouser pocket, one he had taken from his suitcase after the unwanted swim in Rio San Spirito. He got it out and held it up toward the spot where he had heard the man fall, touching the button. A thin beam came on and he could see him out there, lying crumpled at the foot of the drill press with the machine gun on the floor two yards behind him.

For the first time, Carmody allowed his knotted muscles to relax. He swung the light back inside the room and shone it on Rita momentarily; she blinked against its glare, turning her face into her hands, but he could see that she was unhurt. He went out into the work area and turned the gunner over with the toe of one shoe and put the light on his face.

It was Della Robbia.

Blood welled from two holes high on his chest, but he was still alive and breathing raggedly. His eyes were squeezed shut in pain. Carmody swore

softly and fought down a fresh surge of fury. He was not as surprised as he might have been—he had begun to believe Rita's protestations of innocence in the office prior to the shooting—but that did not make the treachery of a man he had trusted any easier to take. Della Robbia, sure, it figured. A lot of things began to figure now.

A light went on behind him, in the office; Rita had found another lamp somewhere. She stood looking out at him for a moment, and then started forward, her movements weak-kneed and jerky. She stopped several paces away, staring down. "It is Della Robbia," she said incredulously.

"Yeah."

"He tried to kill us?"

"Twice," Carmody said.

"I do not understand . . ."

"It's simple enough. He's the one who ambushed us on San Spirito tonight—not Lambresca. Lambresca had nothing to do with any of this; he was just a convenient scapegoat for all concerned."

"But why? Why would he do this?"

"For the money—the same reason I thought you'd sold out Valconazzi. He didn't know how much there would be, but he did know that it would be plenty."

She shook her head in a child-like way.

Carmody said, "Della Robbia

got you to come here tonight, didn't he?"

A convulsive nod answered him.

"You contacted him after you left San Spirito?"

"Yes. I went to his home. I thought you and Renzo were . . . dead. I had nowhere else to go."

"And then he sent you here."

"Yes. He gave me a key and said I was to wait in the office. He told me this was the *squero* of a friend."

"What were you supposed to wait for?"

"For him to come. He promised to help me leave Venezia."

Carmody moved his head slowly up and down. The pattern was almost complete now. If Della Robbia had been able to accomplish it, he would have got Carmody alone after that first telephone call—he must have just arrived home from San Spirito when the call came—and tried to kill him then. But Carmody had talked fast and angrily, not revealing his whereabouts, and Della Robbia had been afraid to force the issue; there had been nothing he could do except to sweat and wait for the next call and hope that Carmody learned nothing in the meantime. Then Rita had shown up on his doorstep: fate playing in his corner, giving him a golden second chance—or so he'd have

thought. He sent the girl here to the *squero*, waited for Carmody to ring up again, and made sure then that he would come too by fabricating the story about Rita's uncle. Della Robbia would have left immediately afterward and come straight here, arriving before Carmody or at least in time to see him enter the grounds; and then he had used a second key to come in silently with the machine gun in hand . . .

On the floor Della Robbia made a choking sound, and Carmody looked down at him. The eyes were open now, and the lips worked soundlessly, groping for words. When he finally found them, they were surprisingly clear. "You are a cat, Signor Carmody, a cat with many lives. I should have killed you twice tonight. I am most . . . sorry I did not." He made a sound that was both a laugh and a liquid cough. "I would do it all again, do you know this? For the fortune Valconazzi carried, I would gladly do it all again."

"Yes?" Carmody said tonelessly. "Well, all right, how did you find out where the hideaway was? Valconazzi didn't tell you and I didn't tell you. The launch wasn't followed tonight, I made sure of that—and when I went out to San Spirito three days ago, I made sure I wasn't followed then, either."

Della Robbia coughed again, and it was very close to being a death rattle; he did not have much more time. He said, "A clever means, signor. The launch . . . was equipped with a shortwave radio. I instructed the driver to open the microphone just before he . . . picked you up, so that when you told him where . . . you would go, I could hear your instructions on my . . . own boat's radio. I did not tell him . . . the reason for this, but he had to die nonetheless . . ."

A tic made the corner of Carmody's mouth twitch slightly. "Where's the money, Della Robbia?"

"My house . . . bedroom closet . . . no point in lying, you would find it . . . you are a cat, signor . . . a cat . . ."

There were more words, but they were lost in a spasm of fluid coughing. Then, all at once, the coughing stopped and the life force was gone from Della Robbia's eyes and he lay still on the cold concrete floor. Carmody turned away.

Rita said, "He is . . . dead?"

Carmody nodded, took the woman's arm. "Come on, it's time we got out of here."

"Where are we to go?"

"To pick up Valconazzi's money. Hell, *your* money. You've earned the right to it. All I want

*(continued on page 34)*

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## The Angler

### by Jack Ritchie

I was his lawyer and I wondered how he could pay for my services. True, he had a half million dollars, but he wouldn't tell anybody where it was, and besides, it was quite hot.

"There's at least one thing in your favor," I said. "You released the boy unharmed."

Eddie Ripley shrugged. "Never touched a hair of his head. I was going to let him go after a while even if his father didn't come across with the ransom. Why would I want to hurt a kid? I like kids."

Two weeks ago, Eddie had kidnapped twelve-year-old Frankie Sorrenson and demanded and gotten five hundred thousand dollars. When the police caught him, they had found no money on him or in his vicinity and he refused to tell them where he had hidden it.

"I think the kid enjoyed the whole thing," Eddie said. "I got him all the comic books he wanted, he had my portable TV, and no school. He probably gained a couple of pounds while he was with me because I fed him real good. Ice cream, pop, hamburgers. The whole bit."

"What about the father?" I asked. "Do you suppose he enjoyed the entire incident too?"

Eddie snorted. "The kid told me plenty. His old man hardly knew he was alive. Frankie's been with nursemaids and stuff like that since his mother died, when he was two."

Frankie's father, Gus Sorrenson, controlled the state's largest construction company and also, it was generally agreed, a considerable number of county supervisors. Consequently our state is laced with his highways, a great number of which seem to be superfluous.

When his son was kidnapped, he had immediately announced that he would not be intimidated. He would refuse to pay the ransom. If he yielded to the kidnapper's demand, it would only encourage other kidnappers across the country.

Ten percent of our population applauded his courageous stand. The other ninety percent wrote letters to newspapers intimating

a certain heartlessness on his part. After ten days—and considerable negative publicity—he capitulated and paid the ransom.

Eddie Ripley brushed back his prematurely gray hair. "You know why I hired you? Because you got a reputation. I hear they tried to disbar you three times."

"Misunderstandings," I said. "No one could prove a thing." I changed the subject. "There is still the question of the ransom money. The police haven't found it and apparently you have no intention of telling them where to look."

"That's right."

I shook my head. "Eddie, you'll never get a chance to spend a cent of it. No matter what I do for you, you're a cinch to get at least life imprisonment."

He grinned. "I'll be eligible for parole in twelve years and eight months."

"Forget the parole. Do you think any parole board is going to turn you loose if that five hundred thousand is still missing?"

Eddie shrugged. "I guess not. So I'll play it cool for three, four years. Put in good time until I get out of maximum security. I broke out of the pen twice before, you know."

Ripley was certainly an optimist. Yet it was quite true that he had, in his career, escaped from state confinement two times. "The police have the serial numbers of all those bills. And probably the money is marked in other ways, too. If you try spending it, even ten or fifteen years from now, you'll be nailed in a week."

He agreed. "But I know where to get rid of it."

"At an eighty or ninety percent discount?"

"No. ~~Dollar~~ for dollar. Or nearly so."

"A Swiss bank? Things aren't quite what they were, Eddie. They wouldn't take a cent of it."

"Not a Swiss bank. I mean one of those islands in the Caribbean that are all turning into republics. What holds them together is the tourist business and the world banks that suddenly open branch offices there. Them banks don't give a damn where the money comes from, just so they get it. They know how to launder it and get it back into circulation on the other side of the world with only a small discount."

He leaned a bit closer. "I was going to take it there myself, but something went sour with the caper and right away the cops were looking for me. I didn't stand a chance of getting out of the country. So I buried the money. In five places."

"Five places? Why five places?"

"Because I don't trust nobody. I put a hundred thousand in each hole." He smiled. "Do you know anybody who'd like to make a hundred thousand easy?"

I coughed slightly and waited.

He lowered his voice, though it was not necessary. We were alone in the small room at police headquarters. "Suppose I tell somebody where one of those holes is? And suppose this somebody took the money he found there to one of them islands and deposited eighty thousand dollars in a bank where I could get at it when I was ready and he could deposit twenty thousand in his own name. And suppose he came back with the proof that he done just that? Then I guess I'd tell him where to find the second hole, and so forth, until we run out of holes."

I listened to my thoughts for a moment. "Why not tell this person where *all* of the holes are? It would save a lot of traveling back and forth to the island."

He smiled again. "Because I wouldn't trust this person as far as I could throw a lead habeas corpus. He'd probably take off with the whole half million and leave me with nothing but tears."

I displayed an understanding nod. "Suppose this unmentioned person should take off with *all* of the hundred thousand he found in the first hole? He could save himself five trips to the island, and a hundred thousand one way appears to be as good as a hundred thousand another."

"Because if he did that, I'd blow the whistle on him. I'd tell the cops he's got some of the ransom money. I might even say that he was my accomplice. But if he does things my way, the hundred thou he ends up with is clean and spendable. Nobody knows where or how he got it."

I fiddled with the clasp of my briefcase for a few moments. "The unnamed person in question will need a little time to think over the proposition. And to see if it can be done."

When I left Eddie, I stopped in at the district attorney's office and talked to Assistant D.A. Porter, who would handle the prosecution.

He did not overwhelm me with hospitality. "Is Ripley going to tell us where to find the money?"

I took an unoffered chair. "Not yet, at least. I suppose you've done some searching?"

"Every place we could think of. He probably buried it somewhere, and this is a big country."

"You went over his apartment?"

"Of course. We even looked up his ex-wife."

"Ex-wife?"

"Yeah. They've been divorced over five years, but you never can tell. For five hundred thousand they might get together for one hit. But nothing turned up. She even volunteered for a lie detector test. Our graph man says she doesn't know anything about the kidnapping or the money. She says she never sees Eddie more than a few minutes when he comes to pick up the kid on Sunday afternoons."

"The kid?"

"He has a boy about the same age as the Sorrenson kid. He gets to keep his son two weeks in the summer, too. All part of the divorce arrangement. His ex-wife says Eddie wasn't much of a husband, but he's crazy about his kid."

Early the next morning, Gus Sorrenson appeared at my office. He's a heavy man with small eyes that glared at me. "So you're defending the kidnapper of my son?"

I corrected him. "I am defending the *alleged* kidnapper of your son."

He brushed that off. "I suppose you're wondering why I'm here?"

"Naturally."

"I might as well get right to the point. I understand that this Ripley character has refused to turn the ransom money over to the police."

"Quite true."

Sorrenson sputtered. "What the hell good will the money do him now? He's not going to be in circulation again for a long, long time, if ever. His only chance for a parole is to turn over the money right now."

"I pointed that out to him. But he wants to hang on to it anyway. Maybe the thought of still having it will keep him warm in the dismal years ahead."

Sorrenson glowered. "I had a hell of a time raising that cash. A hell of a time. Had to turn in bonds. Sign notes. The cops swore up and down that I'd get it all back. Every cent of it."

"Obviously they were wrong."

He leaned forward. "Let's not beat around the bush. I know when to cut my losses. I'm ready to make a deal."

"A deal?"

"That's right. If Ripley turns over four hundred thousand of that money, I'll let him keep the rest."

"I don't quite see what he has to gain by that."

"Look, I'll tell the police that I got *all* of the ransom back. That way the hundred thousand Ripley keeps will be clean. Nobody will be looking for the bills. Hell, he could have it invested for him, and it could double or triple by the time he's eligible for parole. He'll be a rich man when he gets out."

Sorrenson managed a wink. "I don't care how the two of you decide to split the hundred grand. Fifty-fifty, or whatever you think is fair to your client."

I mulled it over. It was true that if I went along with Ripley, I would wind up with a big hundred thousand. But there was always the possibility that something might go wrong and I would inherit more trouble than I could possibly handle.

Doing things Sorrenson's way, I'd manage maybe only fifty grand, but it would put me on the side of the angels—which was considerably safer.

I smiled. "I'll see what I can do, Mr. Sorrenson, I'll see what I can do."

The next morning, I put the offer to Ripley—or at least my version of it. "So Sorrenson will let you keep fifty grand of the ransom money, if you return the rest. It will be a clean fifty grand, Eddie. Just lying there in a bank and making money for you to spend when you get out. And you'll undoubtedly get that parole when you become eligible."

Eddie wasn't buying. "Hell, no."

I cleared my throat. "I just might be able to get Sorrenson to up the offer to sixty grand." I watched his face hopefully. "Maybe even sixty-five. But that's the absolute limit, Eddie. I don't think he'll go for more."

Ripley glared. "Not for fifty grand, a hundred grand, or two hundred grand. I'm going to wind up with four hundred grand and not a cent less." He studied me as though he had decided to get himself another lawyer. "And somebody else is going to pocket a hundred thousand, but I haven't decided who yet."

"Good," I said quickly. "Good."

He frowned. "Good what?"

"I mean I am considerably happy that you turned down Sorrenson's offer. I was hoping you would. Really, Eddie. But I had to pass it on to you. That's ethics, Eddie—to let you decide for yourself

what you want to do. You made a wise decision. A wise decision." I shifted a little in the hard wooden chair. "About depositing that first hundred grand, Eddie. Don't you think we ought to begin just about now?"

He remained dubious. "Not yet. I got to know you a little better."

That night in my apartment I made myself a long drink. I wasn't too enthusiastic about five island trips. Not that I didn't think Ripley's plan would work, but there was always that element of risk in handling hot money.

Then I brightened.

Suppose that after I told Sorrenson that Ripley had turned down his offer cold, I mentioned Ripley's counter-offer to me—the hundred thousand in each pot thing. And I would suggest that I pretend to go along with Ripley. For a cut of a hundred thousand, of course. It was the only way Sorrenson could expect to get his money back.

Sorrenson and I could even get police cooperation. They could manufacture the bankbook or whatever Ripley required as proof that his money was being put into the island banks.

My apartment door buzzer sounded.

I opened the door and stared into the face of a burly man wearing a black domino mask. He held a blued automatic in his gloved hand.

I backed up, as directed by the gesture of the gun. He entered and closed the door behind him.

His hair was quite flaming red, and he had an inch-long scar on the left side of his cleft chin.

He spoke. "I read about you in the papers. You're Eddie Ripley's lawyer, right?"

Was it best to admit or deny it? Which did he want? "Well, at the present moment, I am. However, if there should be any objection from anyone . . ."

"You get to see him whenever you want to?"

"Yes. So far, at least."

He seemed satisfied. "Relax. I'm not after you. I hear he's still holding onto that half million."

I nodded.

The redhaired man sat down. His gloved left hand fished a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He lit up from a book of matches. "I want that five hundred grand," he said. "All of it."

"I assume you expect to get it. Why?"

"Because I got Eddie Ripley's son."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

He exhaled smoke. "What Eddie can do, I can do. So Ripley kidnapped the Sorrenson kid and got five hundred grand, and now I kidnap Eddie's kid and I expect to get five hundred grand, too. From Ripley. I come here because you get in to see Eddie regular and can communicate."

I blinked. Kidnapping a kidnapper's son somehow just didn't seem cricket. Yet, apparently it had been done.

The redhaired man continued. "This whole thing is just between you and me and Eddie. I don't want nobody running to the police."

I was still in a bit of shock. "What about the boy's mother? Won't she bring in the police?"

"No," he said emphatically. "I impressed on her that I would send back the kid piece by piece if she did. Starting with the left ear."

I shuddered. This creature wanted the *entire* five hundred thousand? Utterly unreasonable. Perhaps something could be salvaged for later distribution between me and Sorrenson.

"Eddie might love his son," I said. "But five hundred thousand dollars' worth?" I chuckled. "You and I, sir, are reasonable men. Eddie's love undoubtedly has its limit, which I would estimate at a hundred thousand. Even then, I feel sure it would be like pulling teeth."

He smiled. "Speaking of teeth, I'll send those back too, one by one, after I run out of ears. I want the whole five hundred grand or it's D-Day for the kid."

D-Day? Dismemberment Day? Clearly the man was a monster. One cannot haggle with monsters, and yet . . .

I cleared my throat. "Of course you realize that this money is all marked. Attempting to spend it will be hazardous to your health. However—for a slight consideration—I could suggest a place where—"

He interrupted. "I know where to launder the money. And I'll be getting a suntan and drinking rum and cola when I do."

So he knew about those island banks? Damn.

I needed time to think, to plan something else that would not leave my pockets empty. "Assuming that Ripley will agree to pay the ransom, there will still be some difficulty in gathering all of the money together. Eddie has buried it in five different places. He hasn't told me where, of course, but I gather that the spots are far

apart. I might have to do considerable traveling to assemble the entire amount. It might take weeks."

"You got one week," he said. "One week or I buy myself stamps and start mailing things."

"How will I get in touch with you?"

"I'll do the touching. By phone."

When he left, I bolted the door.

Carefully I retrieved the matchbook he'd left behind, handling it only by its edges.

It was a typical twenty-match pack, advertising a national chain of supermarkets on the cover, but twelve of the matches had been used. The redhaired man had worn gloves when he lit up here, but I doubted that he had worn gloves when he had used the pack in lighting any of those other missing matches.

I slipped it into an envelope and drove to the suburban home of Sergeant Ben Luther.

Luther appeared at the door in slippers, carrying a can of beer. He smiled when he saw me. It meant business for him—unofficial business for which he expected to be paid.

I handed him the envelope. "There's a pack of matches in there. I want it gone over for fingerprints, and I want to find out who they belong to."

"How do you know he's been printed anywhere?"

"I don't. But try anyway."

He took the envelope. "I'm not in fingerprints, and it's not so easy to ask favors like that at headquarters. I might have to lay out a few bucks here and there, but I think fifty will cover it."

Sheer robbery, of course, but I handed him five tens. "I want a rush job. Call me as soon as you get anything."

I went to see Eddie Ripley early the next morning. He paled when I told him about the kidnapping of his son.

"My advice to you," I said, "is to offer him a hundred thousand. There's no point in shooting the whole works if we . . . if you don't have to."

Eddie did not agree at all. "This is nothing to dicker about. The kid could get killed. Give the man the whole damn five hundred grand. I'm beginning to think I never would get to spend it anyhow. They're making jails a lot tighter than they used to."

He wagged a warning finger at me. "If anything happens to that kid, I'm holding you personally responsible. And if you try to take

off and leave that kid in the lurch, I swear I'll get out and kill you, no matter where you run."

"My dear sir," I said indignantly. "The boy's welfare is my concern, too. I could not rest another night if he were harmed in any manner."

Ripley proceeded to reveal to me where he had hidden the money. He had memorized the directions, of course, but they were quite complicated and it was necessary for me to put them down on paper. Each cache was located in a lightly populated rural area where there was little danger of anyone's questioning why you were digging.

It required two days for me to find and dig up all of the money.

When I reached my apartment, I bolted the door and spread the currency on my dining room table. I counted it. Yes, it was all there. Exactly five hundred thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills.

I found my pulse pounding as I stared at the stacks of money—all of it ripe for the taking.

Was it worthwhile becoming a fugitive for five hundred thousand dollars? Was it worthwhile giving up my present identity, my contacts, my practice?

I rubbed my neck. Actually I do very little repeat business. My clients seem to feel that dealing with me once is quite enough.

Was it worthwhile giving up all the things I had here for five hundred thousand dollars uneroded by income taxes?

Frankly, yes.

I sighed heavily. Unfortunately my lack of conscience contained an Achilles heel—I entertain a certain respect for the lives of children. Money was one thing, but I could not live with the responsibility of a boy's death, especially if it were accomplished ear by ear, tooth by tooth, and whatever.

My phone rang.

It was Sergeant Luther. "There were two pretty good prints on the matchbook. Thumb and forefinger, and we had them in the local files. Your man is Gaylord Bysshe Brettschneider. Six foot, two hundred pounds. Scar on cleft chin. Red hair. His record shows armed robbery. Been put away twice. Right now he's out on parole."

"I know."

"He lives right here in the city—167 North Bark Street."

When I hung up, my mind churned once again. Perhaps I had another angle to work on.

Ripley would have to pay the ransom, of course. But as soon as the boy was released safely, I would go to the police and tell them where to find the kidnapper. They would arrest Brettschneider and recover the money.

I paused. What would that do for me?

There was no official reward for its return and I couldn't count on Sorrenson's generosity to offer one voluntarily after the fact of recovery, so to speak.

No, I would have to see Sorrenson first and get an ironclad agreement—in writing—to ensure that I would get a hundred thousand dollars of the ransom, no matter how or by whom it was recovered—just as long as it was.

I phoned the Sorrenson Construction Company for an appointment, but Sorrenson's secretary informed me that he was out of town for the weekend and she didn't know where.

I cradled the phone and decided I might just as well see where that redheaded monster lived.

I packed the money into a suitcase and took it with me down to the car. After all, I didn't want some burglar stumbling into a bonanza while I was gone.

Brettschneider's address, 167 North Bark Street, proved to be a Victorian structure in an old residential neighborhood gone to seed. It had apparently been cut up into apartments.

I made a turn at the end of the block, with the intention of coming back for a closer look, but then I quickly pulled to the curb and parked.

Ahead of me a somewhat battered sedan drew up in front of the address. A large, flaming-haired man got out of the driver's side of the car.

It was unmistakably Gaylord Bysshe Brettschneider.

The passenger side of the car opened too, and a small redhaired boy of about ten hopped out. He wore a baseball glove and the two of them tossed a ball back and forth a few times before they disappeared into the house. I noticed that the boy limped rather badly on his right foot.

So Brettschneider had a son too? Obviously the two of them were close; a typical warm relationship between father and son.

A new and startling idea formed in my mind.

There had already been two kidnappings, why couldn't there be three?

After Ripley paid the ransom and his boy was released, why

couldn't I strike out for myself and kidnap the Brettschneider kid? All I needed was a dozen comic books, a portable TV, a place to confine the redhead kid, and I was in business.

Certainly Brettschneider would pay the five hundred thousand if he loved his boy at all, and every cent of it would be mine. Best of all, Brettschneider could hardly go to the police to complain.

I drove home in high spirits.

I made myself a large drink and recounted the money.

Naturally I wouldn't harm a hair of the kid's head, but I'd have to tell Brettschneider that if the ransom weren't paid, I would disassemble the boy, item by item. The mere suggestion should jolt his imagination enough so that he would be more than eager to pay.

I took a deep drink.

Of course Brettschneider would be worried sick about the kid. So would the boy's mother, and he probably had one.

What about the boy himself? I would assure him that I meant him no harm, but would he believe me? Would he, instead, be utterly terrified?

How does one deal with a terrified boy? Was I justified in traumatizing his little psyche for the sake of a rotten five hundred grand?

I brooded through three more drinks before I was forced to accept the fact that I just couldn't go through with it. Kidnapping wasn't my kind of action. I would probably bungle it somehow anyway.

I sighed heavily. I would have to go back to Sorrenson and see what kind of a deal I could squeeze out of him.

I made my fifth drink, another double.

After the Ripley kid was returned, I would inform the police of Brettschneider's whereabouts. They would descend upon him and cart him off to prison for at least twelve years and eight months—just when his kid needed him the most.

I blew my nose. The kid had a bad limp. Was that why Brettschneider turned to crime? Did the kid need some kind of a corrective operation? An expensive operation? By specialists who wouldn't lift a scalpel without money in sight?

Was Brettschneider covered by Blue Cross? Blue Shield? Any type of medical insurance? Probably not.

There was no question about it. This was a cruel world. No matter which way one turned, one hurt someone or lost money.

That redhaired kid reminded me of Tiny Tim—the one in *A Christmas Carol*, of course. He had a bad limp too.

I wiped away the birth of a tear. How did my glass get empty so soon? I poured another.

Wasn't there some way I could avoid sending Brettschneider to prison and still make a little money?

I woke up the next morning still at the dining room table. I took two aspirin, survived a cold shower, and breakfasted on black coffee before I went to see Ripley.

Naturally the first thing he asked was, "Did you pick up the money?"

I nodded tiredly. "Yes."

"Did the kidnapper get in touch with you again?"

"Not yet. But he will. And I'm sure your boy is still all right."

Ripley stared out of the barred window. "I had big plans for that money, but that's all gone now." He shrugged. "Well, at least Mabel will be out there to take care of the boy. She's getting married again. I guess she still goes for redheads."

"Redheads?"

He indicated his own hair.

"Used to be red before it turned."

A sudden mouth-opening thought struck me. "Do you know anybody about six feet tall, two hundred pounds? Cleft chin with a scar on it? And red hair?"

He nodded. "Sounds like you're talking about G. B. Brettschneider. He's the man she's marrying. I met him in the pen, and we both got paroled at the same time. I introduced him to Mabel, and I guess things took."

I was shaken. "One more thing. This son of yours, what does he look like?"

"He's twelve, but a little short for his age. Could pass for ten. Red hair. The last time I saw him he was limping. Twisted his ankle sliding into second base. Brettschneider's like a second father to the boy. They get along fine."

I closed my eyes.

The whole damn second kidnapping had been a fake. Ripley's kid never was in danger or would be. It was just a scheme on the part of Brettschneider, and probably Mabel, to pry the ransom money loose from Ripley.

I had been emotionally swindled.

Something else occurred to me, too. At this given moment, Ripley

did not have the money, Sorrenson did not have the money, and Brettschneider did not have the money—but I did; in a suitcase in my care.

I smiled.

On the way home to pack some of my clothes, I stopped in at a travel agency and picked up several brochures on the Caribbean.

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*(continued from page 21)*

is the fee Valconazzi and I agreed on."

She shook her head in that childlike way again. "And then?"

"I do the job I was hired for," Carmody said. "It might take another day or two to rearrange

things, but I'll find a place for us to do the waiting. It won't be too bad."

She looked at him with her large dark eyes. "No," she said, "I do not think it will be bad at all."

# C Is for Cookie

by Rob Kantner

**N**o" isn't a word I like to say to pretty women. But I'd said it to Charlotte Ambrose, in no uncertain terms, when she disappeared from the restaurant, leaving me stuck with her screaming two-year-old charge.

I hadn't wanted to meet her in the first place. Charlotte and I were an old deal, long dead and a bitter memory. But in that excited, rich-broad, enthusiastic way of hers, she'd persuaded me on the phone to meet her at Mr. Mike's in Westland to talk over an "assignment." There was money in it for me, she said. That tipped the scales in favor of going, if only barely.

It had been twelve years so she looked older, but she was still the white-blonde, creamy Nordic, limber, and sensual Charlotte that I remembered. And the money she offered was my usual rate—two fifty per day plus expenses. But the job was crap, a locate job on a boyfriend of hers who'd disappeared. I turned her down without a second thought, partly because I didn't like the sound of the job and partly for the satisfaction of saying no to her just once and,

in that small, petty way, getting back at her for what she'd done to me years before. And then, without the slightest warning, she excused herself to go to the restroom and just plain dropped out of sight.

I didn't realize it at first, of course. I finished my beer and smoked a cigar and stared absently around the restaurant at the handful of people there. Then the kid, a chubby little blue-eyed boy named Will, commenced to screaming. I fidgeted, offering him crackers to eat and utensils to play with, but he sent up a howl to the ceiling, his plump face red like a balloon. Charlotte's pit stop stretched abnormally long, and I finally sent a waitress to check up on her. Gone, she said. Not in the parking lot, either. Leaving me alone with the brat.

**I** know she's a bitch," Kate said, "but why would she abandon her kid? With you?"

We were in my apartment in Belleville and the kid was clinging to my leg, staring at Kate. He'd stopped hollering about halfway back from Mr. Mike's

and was doing the shy wide-eyed bit, occasionally issuing a hiccup. Kate was staying with me for a few days because her ex-husband, whose name is, apparently, That Jerk, was conducting his semi-annual harassment campaign against her and she needed a place to hide out. I said, "The kid's not hers. She told me she was babysitting him for a friend who was away for a few days."

Kate was a short, shaggy off-blond, painfully thin and gaunt, and she wore her usual expression of half skepticism and half harried patience. "You know, in the six years we've been involved, I've seen you get people shot in my house, and I've seen you rough up deputy sheriffs, and I've seen you take some of the sleaziest characters in the world out for dinner. But I never imagined you'd bring home an abandoned toddler."

"That's why you should stick around, kid. Officially I may be just an apartment maintenance guy, but there's always more to Perkins than that." I disengaged Will from my leg and headed into the kitchen to build a drink and figure out what to do. Kate went over to the kid. "Are you hungry, Will?"

"Ha," he said seriously, his face still flushed.

To Kate's arched eyebrow I

interpreted, having picked up a little of the kid's jargon, "Yes."

"See cookie," Will added.

"I'll check," she answered. As she pawed through the cupboards, I poured myself some straight Jack Daniel's. Groping among the boxes, wrappers, and debris, she said, "I take it you turned her down."

"I did."

She found a bag of stale Oreos and handed one to the boy, who practically inhaled it, looking hopefully and much more happily at Kate. "What was the job?"

"Some boyfriend of hers disappeared. She wanted him found. I wasn't up for it."

"Sure, Ben. But now you're stuck with the kid. What do you plan to do about that?"

Will had found the bathroom and I heard the toilet flush. Thank God—a good, disciplined, toilet-trained little kid. He came out of the bathroom sans jeans and trailing a long stream of toilet paper. As Kate and I both dived to gather it up, I said, "She's just peevish. Sooner or later she'll call me and tell me who the kid's mother is. Or, even better, I'll call her." I left Kate to pull the kid's pants back on, shoved the bundle of toilet paper into the wastebasket, and went to the phone where I found taped to it a slip with a telephone number.

"The Kroger's store in Belleville called," Kate said from behind me. "Apparently the check you passed there bounced."

"I didn't pass a check, I gave them one. And if it bounced, it's probably some screwup." At least I hoped so, since my checking account seemed to have a mind of its own. I reached for the phone and it rang as my hand touched the receiver.

"Enjoying the babysitting?" Charlotte asked sweetly.

I sighed. "Nice gag, Charlotte."

Kate leaned her bluejeaned fanny against the edge of the counter, listening. The boy was studiously opening and closing cupboard doors but apparently was well brought up enough not to mess with anything inside. In my ear, Charlotte laughed and said, "I do rather fancy the idea of your taking care of a little baby boy, but I must confess that humor wasn't my only motive."

Charlotte never did anything that didn't redound to her advantage. "So fill me in," I said evenly.

"You do the job, Ben," she said. "Find Chuck Crane for me. And then I'll tell you where the kid belongs. Don't worry, nobody's looking for him right now. You've got enough time, if you're at all as talented at your

work as I'm told you are. And I'll pay you as agreed."

The boy, having decided I was okay, I guess, was giving me a sunny, radiant look, which was about all I needed just then.

I said, "This is one sick, twisted game you're playing, Charlotte."

"But effective. And don't think about trying to track me down. I'm where you could never, ever find me. You'll never find the boy's mother, either. When you have the answer, call my home number and leave word on my message box. Within four hours I'll call you back and we'll meet someplace. Do it fast, Ben." She hung up.

I slammed the phone down and banged my fist against the wall, which got me nothing but sore knuckles. Kate looked more gaunt than usual. I told her the story and she said immediately, "So turn the kid over to the cops. Simple enough."

I sat down on a chair and lighted a small cork-tipped cigar. After a long pause I said, "Nope. Not right now, anyway."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"Because," I said without looking at her, "I take care of things myself. I don't dump them off on someone else. You know that."

"So you're going to let that ruthless swine strong-arm you," she jibed.

The boy stood between us, eyes wide, not understanding the words but picking up on the tone, for sure. "I can't win every point, Kate."

"Yeah," she said grimly, pushing herself away from the counter and going to the sink. She made herself speciously busy with some dishes. "You just want to do it. This is just a convenient excuse to get involved with her again. You just don't learn, do you?"

It was a dumb argument and one I'd run out of patience with. Getting to my feet, I said, "You got a choice. Come with me while I try to get a line on this Crane fella, or sit here and sulk."

"I'll stay here, thanks," she said. "The boy's had enough moving around for one day. You go and help your girlfriend."

Kate could sure turn on a person, I reflected as I headed out I-94 in my '71 Mustang. It had been getting worse lately, worse than ever. After six years, it was finally going sour. I knew it and she knew it; what we hadn't got around to yet was what Bob Seeger calls "the famous final scene."

She came close to starting one with that girlfriend crack, though—as if I wanted to do the job, as if Charlotte meant anything to me any more. Fact was,

I was feeling nothing but cold burning fury at what she'd done, exploiting a helpless two-year-old and the boy's unknowing family. But it was like her.

We'd met in the mid-sixties under the most clichéd of circumstances: her mother and my mom fixed us up. The two women couldn't have been more different. Charlotte's mother was your typical Franklin Village matron, and my mom was a nursing home supervisor who boarded kids for rich folks to make a few extra bucks. (Sidelines, you see, are an old Perkins family tradition, though my mom's moonlighting was far more respectable than mine.)

One of my mom's boarders—and a real brat as I recall—was Charlotte's younger brother. My mom thought it would be good for me to find a "nice girl" from a "good family" and settle down. And forget the questionable job I had as aide to a union boss with a smudged reputation. What Charlotte's mother thought isn't on the record, although I suspect she welcomed the suit of a no-frills straight arrow like me after seeing a steady parade of giggle-headed rich kids march through Charlotte's life. Shy Charlotte wasn't.

It started for laughs and got heavy quick, quicker than either of us expected. Unlike most of the women I'd known until then,

Charlotte was dynamic. Her considerable physical attributes aside, she was bright, enthusiastic, challenging, tough-minded, and exciting. Her bright light burned white hot, attracting people to her; and sometimes I'd sit and wonder what she saw in me, a straight, sober, hard-edged Detroit boy on the make.

We got ourselves a house in the Jefferson-Chalmers neighborhood. It was one of the older ones, a rambling yellow brick place on the Detroit River with its own boathouse. My job was increasingly intense and dangerous, and Charlotte was meteoric and unpredictable and not the easiest person in the world to live with, and yet, all these years later, I remember those days as being tranquil. I remember barbecue dinners out on the big airy porch; long walks along the river; card games and beer of an evening with one or two of the young couples who lived around us; evenings spent in debate; sunrise strolls around the Belle Isle fountain; afternoons making love in the enormous second story riverfront bedroom while the curtains floated in the air and freighters glided by outside in ghastly silence.

The riot in 1967 changed things for keeps. My mom's nursing home got torched and

she died on the second day, trying to get an inmate out. The Feds came after my boss and some others on tax and racketeering charges and they zeroed in on me, trying to make me Public Snitch Number One. I refused to talk, even though they gave me immunity; my name got in the papers; and one day, when it looked as if I was going to jail on contempt charges, I came home to find Charlotte gone. Not a word. Just empty closets and her car gone from the garage.

Things bottomed out then, thank God. The Feds made their case via the net worth method, the defendants went off to Lewisburg, and I went off the hook. A lot of years passed and I never heard of Charlotte again—and thought of her as little as possible, which is to say once a day.

But I didn't rehash ancient history on my way to Southfield. Instead, I tried to piece together what I'd half-heard from Charlotte as she told me about her mysterious Chuck Crane. A thin, wiry, athletic man, she said, in his mid-thirties. She'd met him on St. Patrick's Day at one of the Irish bars on the west side. He lived in the Franklin Park Towers and drove a Corvette. He had lots of clothes, manners, style, money, and smarts, and he never seemed to work. He called himself an "investor." He and Char-

lotte made several long trips together, one to Switzerland, one to the Bahamas, and she introduced him to her daddy, whom I once sarcastically referred to as the "oil seal king." By Charlotte's standards the affair was serious.

Until he disappeared a month ago.

The Franklin Park Towers sprawls at the intersection where the Lodge Freeway dumps out onto I-696 heading west and Telegraph Road shoots north toward Pontiac. There's a lot of government land there, including a couple of military reserve outfits and an old Nike missile base; there are also shopping centers, synagogues, and endless miles of well-heeled subdivisions with names like Bingham Farms, Mayfair, and Beverly Hills. I've often thought of it as the place where Detroit busted open and gushed people north.

The apartments are huge and glum looking, the style known as Twentieth Century Insane Asylum. Pretty they aren't, but they happen to be one of the prestige addresses of the Detroit area. I found Crane's apartment and, with the timely help of a skeleton key I'd acquired at great cost some years before (its previous owner is now a guest of the state at Marquette), gained entry.

It was a single bedroom place,

conspicuously neat and sterile; rented furniture, nothing personal on the walls, none of the little debris of personality in the place at all. I had the bizarre feeling that I'd broken by accident into the complex's model apartment—a place everyone looked at but no one lived in—not a place where a wealthy young man had lived for several years. Judging from the dry sink, the painstaking orderliness of the silverware and plates, the clean dry tub and the absence of dirty linen, it looked to me as if no one had lived there for a month or more, maybe. There was also a feeling of emptiness. Like a personality had been there once but had left for good.

The resident rental agent wasn't much help. He had, after all, a huge number of tenants to keep track of, and he didn't know any of them personally, let alone Chuck Crane. I also don't think he was overly impressed with my cover story that I was an investigator for Mass Mutual Insurance. He glumly went through his records anyway, giving me beady little hostile looks. Yes, Crane had rented the apartment. He'd paid his rent a year in advance (and the thought occurred to me: who in his right mind does *that?*). No, there were never any complaints about him. Where Crane worked was not the agent's busi-

ness. The only concrete thing I could get out of him was Crane's license plate number. A thin, very frail thread, but the best I could do.

I headed south on Telegraph to the huge, cylindrical Holiday Inn, went inside to a bank of phones, and called a friend in Lansing. She's a financial analyst for the state of Michigan, and a damned good one, and she has that invaluable resource for a fellow in my line of work, direct and unlimited access to the state's computer records. She even carries a portable terminal home, which was where I found her. I think helping me is a kick for her, even though she fusses a lot about my occasional requests. I help her out with things from time to time, and buy her lunch in Detroit once a month, so it evens out. Sort of.

She put me on hold and was gone quite a while firing up her terminal and going into the computer on her second telephone line. She came back to tell me that Crane's car was registered to a firm called Pan Peninsular Products—such a Michigan kind of name I was surprised they didn't throw a "Wolverine" in—based in the Penobscot Building in Detroit. I asked, in passing, for a rundown on the company and she said it would take some time

and she'd get back to me on it later that night.

It was pushing late afternoon by then, but I headed straight down to the Penobscot. It was tired looking and half empty, like many downtown office buildings since the Renaissance Center went up a few years back. Pan Peninsular occupied a suite on the tenth floor. I stood in the echoing hallway and did my magic act with a skeleton key again. I found the suite stripped clean—nothing left but the stink of cigarettes, a couple of rickety, ready-for-junkyard desks, and severed coils of telephone cables. Pan Peninsular no longer existed, as far as I could tell, except for the name neatly stenciled on the rippled glass door.

**T**he TV flickered color into the otherwise dark living room of my apartment as I entered. In the strange strobe-like light, Kate's gaunt face looked stark and stony. She turned to me as I closed the door and said without greeting, "Garden City Medical Center called while you were gone. That check you sent them on your Uncle Dan's account bounced."

I went purposefully into the kitchen, poured myself a big shot of Jack Daniel's black, and rescued a bottle of Stroh's from the refrigerator. Back in the liv-

ing room I saw that Kate wasn't drinking—a bad sign. I said, "Where's the boy?"

"Sleeping in your bed. He fell asleep about eight, after wiping out your Oreo supply, two hot dogs, and an entire can of pork and beans. God, if my kids had eaten like that . . . What's with your checking account lately, anyway? You underfinanced, or something?"

"Nah, that's not it," I said absently. I sat down at the other end of the couch from her and noted that she made no move to slide down and join me. In a feeble attempt to get past our awkwardness, I told her what I'd found out—which amounted to a big fat zero. I finished, "So Crane's a big phony. The only question is, what was his game and where did he go? Hopefully, Lansing will get me some information tonight. Maybe I'll get it ironed out and get the kid back home tomorrow."

"And if not you can call the cops," she said flatly.

I got the telephone off the hi-fi cabinet, sat on the couch, shucked my shoes, and dialed Lansing. My friend picked the phone up before the second ring.

"Pan Peninsular's a shell, Ben," she told me.

"What do you mean?"

"It's hollow. Business license and incorporation papers only. No assets, no taxes, the officers

are professional front guys. The outfit, as far as the state of Michigan is concerned, is a company in name only."

"Okay, kid, do me some bluesky. In your experience, what does this mean?"

There was a brief hissing of long distance silence and then she said, "All right, but this is off the record."

"Always. Always."

"It's one of two things," she said slowly. "Either it's an organization front, for laundering money or something, or . . . just maybe . . . it's a government front, one of those sting operations. I've seen it happen both ways. You get enough official paper to stand a cursory inspection, and go from there."

I got my last cigar out of my shirt pocket and lighted it from a wood match struck against my thumbnail. The smoke showed translucent gray, like a navy ship, in the light of the TV set. "Anything more you can tell me? Who do I talk to now?"

She laughed. "Either the organization or someone in Justice. You know the players better than I do, Ben."

"I hear you. Thanks, kid."

"Listen, for this you owe me London Chop House."

"And here I had a nice A & W Root Beer all picked out for you."

I heard her laugh as I hung

up. Kate was watching *The Dukes of Hazzard* and I pondered for a moment. Sure, I knew the players all right, but it had to be approached with great precision. Finally I picked up the phone, searched my memory, and dialed tentatively. My contact wasn't available, which was the routine; I hung up and a few minutes later the phone rang. I snatched it up. My contact was upset, highly upset. He spoke in that business-speak dialect that indicated he was worried about my phone's being tapped, despite the number of years he's known me.

I gave him a few pieces of information, but didn't muscle him, partly because I've never needed to, and partly because it wouldn't have worked. My strongest selling point was that Pan Peninsular had closed up shop and Crane had disappeared, so it was old business and there was no reason not to give me the story. My contact hemmed and hawed and then certified to me that Chuck Crane was not known among his colleagues, in either the Detroit or Pontiac operations, and that there had been no business involving such a person. I hung up, knowing that the next call would tell the tale.

The *Dukes* were on commercial. Kate stirred and said, "You know, it's a pity."

"What's that, kid?"

"We're alone in the room and you're not even here."

Hell of a time for heavy mysteries. "Look, it's late and I've got a few more calls to make, okay?"

She shrugged. I picked up the phone again and called the highest police authority I knew, Detective Captain Elvin Dance of the Detroit police department.

I first got to know Elvin when he was a strikebreaker with one of the car companies in the early sixties. Fortunately, he went legit after that and joined the police department and did very well for himself. To no one's surprise. Elvin is a good, solid, practical cop, half politician and half lawman, a remarkable combination for a man who grew up in a slum and earned his Ph.D. at night at Wayne State. He was on duty, which wasn't unusual, and at his desk, which was.

"Run that by one more time, Ben."

"What I said was," I said distinctly, "you find whoever you have to and tell them I know about Crane and the sting operation he was running. I don't know what his game was and I don't care. All I want to know is where the man is." I felt my heart pounding. "Or I'll go to every media organ in town and turn them loose on it. Confidentiality guaranteed. This is in-

formation for a client of mine not involved in the business."

"You know, Ben," he said, his voice a coarse growl, "there's been some heavy federal action round here lately. Mucho sensitive. How much of that big nose of yours you want whacked off? I'm just asking, as a friend of yours."

I said, "You get the word out now. I want a call back from a top player tonight. That happens, and nothing further gets said to anybody."

He sighed, "I'll look into it, man."

The Duke boys were headed toward their showdown with the Boss, and I didn't feel welcome to interrupt. Instead I morosely smoked my cigar, thinking about the downside: red lights in the parking lot, handcuffs on the wrists, the fast hustle to the waiting car, the grim professional faces firing tough professional questions. I'd come close to it before, but usually for better reasons than helping a selfish, strong-willed, adrenaline junkie.

And the phone rang. I picked it up with a slippery hand. It was Bill Scozzafava, the bartender at my local watering hole, Under New Management.

"You ever heard of uttering and publishing, stupid?"

It was his polite and legal way of informing me that one of my

Detroit Bank drafts had gone rubber on him. I smoothed him over, promising him cash money the next day. I cut off the conversation as quickly as I could and hung up. I was getting tired and my mind was wandering and it seemed like only moments later when the phone rang again.

The voice was, as might be expected, unknown to me. Anonymous, masculine, bland, purposeful. It said, "You have made inquiries about a man named Crane. You have made certain guarantees. We accept the guarantees because we have the means to enforce them, as you probably recall from your encounter with us in the late sixties. What you need to know about the story is as follows. . . ."

When I hung up, Kate was gone. I found her sleeping with Will in my bed. It was a pretty picture.

I went back to the living room and with thick fingers punched out Charlotte's number. Her answering machine gave a perky spiel and when the tone sounded I told her to meet me at the Belle Isle fountain at seven. Good a place as any.

I found a thin summer blanket in my linen closet and wrapped it around me like a shroud and fell into an awkward and restless sleep on the couch.

\* \* \*

**S**he wore a white blouse open to the breasts and white deck pants over white sandals, and she sat on the rim of the defunct Belle Isle fountain. A short distance away on the curving drive was a knee-high stainless steel DeLorean that I assumed was hers. I parked behind it and walked over to her. The sun was rising over Windsor to the south, bathing her white-blonde hair and casting ambivalent shadows of darkness and light over the pathetic grandeur of the dry fountain. I sat down a piece away from her and lighted a cigar, filling my rusted mouth and lungs with good coarse smoke.

"You owe me a name."

With an amused and triumphant look, she retorted, "You owe *me* the story."

"Know anybody in cocaine, Charlotte?"

She squinted into the sun and smiled at me, her impossibly white and even teeth glinting in the new sun.

"Of course. Doesn't everybody?"

"I'm talking traffic, not the trendy geeks into an occasional party snort."

"You know me," she said smugly. "I only deal with the top people in any field."

"Seen any of them around lately?" I asked wearily.

In the silence she slowly

straightened and began, by God, to look a little uncertain. "No, it's gotten pretty quiet. What are you getting at, Ben?"

"Your friend Crane was D. E. A. That's Drug Enforcement Administration, the Justice arm that handles drugs, since the F. B. I. has never had jurisdiction in that particular area. Crane's part of a real small, elite group. They're called the Flying Squad. They're moles, Charlotte. They move into an area and live three, four, five years undercover. They work their way into the drug traffic, build the book on the top people in it, turn the case, and disappear. They never even stay around to testify, their work is that thorough. They don't have names. They don't have real identities or lives. The case is their whole life."

I hadn't noticed it before, but the sharp uncaring sunlight was showing a pattern of lines and creases in her face that wasn't there twelve years ago. Apparently the years hadn't been any kinder to her than I was. It occurred to me how vital her flip, arrogant attitude was to her good looks. She said flatly, "So he busted them."

"He's in St. Louis now, burrowing his way in. You'll never see him again. It wasn't real to him, Charlotte, it was just a case and you were part of it."

She stood up angrily. "It was more than that to him. Believe me, I know." She thought of something. "After all, he protected me. He didn't turn me in with the rest."

She was asking for it and I didn't hesitate to give it to her. "You're a dilettante, Charlotte. A thrill-seeking groupie. He's a pro and he sized you up right away. He knew, with your social connections, he could ride you right into the mainstream. But once he had the case nailed down, you were nothing to him any more. He got the principals but didn't bother with you because you were nothing but small fry. And guys like him have no use for small fry."

She smiled, but it was forced, the bright light extinguished. "You know," she said, cocking her head to one side as she narrowed her eyes, "I had other reasons for wanting to see you. The assignment wasn't the only thing. I did care for you—"

"You didn't care for me. You loved my game. The union, the scandal, the investigation, the notoriety. I finally worked that out for myself, when I was trying to deal with the fact that you ran like a rat when my back was to the wall. You wanted the game but you couldn't take the heat."

"No," she shouted, her face lean and ugly, "I left because

you were just what you are now: nothing! Look at you! A maintenance man and . . . and a detective! All you've gotten is older. You haven't gotten anywhere, after all these years, haven't achieved a thing, just another flunk."

"As opposed to you, presumably."

After a long silence, she nodded abruptly and hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her pants. "Well, I got what I wanted." She took a step to go, then hesitated. "I wish I hadn't had to use the kid to muscle you, but the results speak for themselves. His mother will be out at your place this morning to pick Will up. She'll never speak to me again, of course, but that's not a big price to pay."

She turned. "Goodbye, Ben." "Just a minute," I said roughly, taking her arm. She turned, her blue eyes directed indifferently at me. "You're into this flunk for a day and some gas money. Call it two seventy-five and we're quits."

She smiled contemptuously, went into her purse, and counted out two C-notes and four twenties. I curled them into a stiff tube and stuck them into my shirt pocket, then fished out a crumpled five and gave it to her. Without another word or look, I headed back to my car. She called something that the rising

wind muffled. It might have been thanks but, knowing Charlotte, it probably wasn't.

**T**he tension was electric in my kitchen. The boy was hunkered on his knees on one of my chairs at the small dinette, spooning Cheerios sloppily into his mouth. Kate was at the other end of the table, cupping a mug of coffee in her hands. And another woman sat between her and Will, a tall medium blonde with a long voluptuous figure and a Lady Diana haircut. She rose, a worried, uncertain smile on her face, and Kate said to me, "This is Will's mother, Ben. Carole Somers."

Mrs. Somers wore a one-piece denim dress that ended just below her knees, revealing elegant long legs beneath. Her eyes warmed up as she held out her hand and I shook it. "From what Kate's been telling me, Mr. Perkins, I owe you a ton of thanks—and a certain ex-friend a punch in the jaw." Despite the words, her dark brown eyes were merry, her smile as golden as her hair.

"Name's Ben, Carole. No thanks needed. Charlotte mentioned you were an old friend of hers?" I let her hand go, still feeling its warmth in my palm.

The boy was giving me that radiant, adoring look again, and this wasn't lost on Carole, who

smiled. "Past tense, for sure. You too?"

"With seniority," I grinned. Kate sat straight-faced, watching me as I poured myself a cup of coffee and leaned back against the counter. "You leave the boy with her often?"

Carole shrugged. "Once in a while, when I have to travel. When I got in at Metro this morning there was a message from her telling me where to pick Will up. I was curious but not alarmed. Not until Kate told me the story." She gave the boy a smile. "You sure took good care of him."

"It was Kate," I admitted.

"No trouble," Kate shrugged.

"See cookie," Will announced.

"We're all out," Kate said. "This kid and cookies—"

"Oh, that's not what he means," Carole laughed. "He watches *Sesame Street* and that's a song the Cookie Monster sings. 'C is for Cookie, that's good enough for me.'"

Kate wasn't exactly mirthful that morning, but she laughed with us at that. Carole got up then, gathered up Will, and headed for the door. I followed her and found out as she thanked me effusively that she lived in Berkley and wanted to keep in touch with me. Well, that made two of us.

Back in the kitchen, Kate handed me the phone, which I

hadn't heard ring. "Detroit Bank."

The lady was very upset with me. I bank by mail, mainly, and I'd sent in a couple of payroll checks and forgotten to endorse them. They promptly mailed them back for endorsement, but since I'm pretty lazy and don't open my mail more than once a week, I didn't know what had gone wrong until the bank, nervous, began bouncing my checks all over the place. I endured the lecture, promised to stop in and correct the problem, and hung up.

Kate was at the door, lugging her overnight bag. "What do you say?" she asked lightly.

Theoretically, after six years, plenty. But I inquired, "What about That Jerk?"

"He's probably given up by now. If not, I'll run him off. God knows I've done it before." She

opened the door and turned to me, at the very edge of her composure. "Isn't it the damnedest thing. C is for Cookie. Sometimes we forget." Then she hefted her bag and left quickly.

I shut the door and thought that, if she'd stayed, I'd probably have replied that C also stands for cocaine, checks, conspiracies. But I've found that you usually don't get to say everything you want to during the famous final scene.

I suppose you could say that I netted out on the deal. Kate was gone, but there was Carole, whom I saw a lot of in the time that followed. And I made friends with a damned nice little kid, my first brush with domesticity.

Ironic, I guess.

Charlotte wanted something badly but didn't get it. I came into the situation not wanting or expecting anything, but got plenty. And got paid besides.

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# The Body Behind the Billboard

by C. B. Gilford

Lieutenant Challice was riding with Patrolman Damiano only three blocks from the scene when the call came through. In a vacant lot, somebody had reported, behind a billboard, lying amid the brush and the debris, there was the dead body of a girl.

Patrolman Damiano did a U-turn and flicked on the siren at the same time. Homeward bound traffic edged grudgingly out of their way. Lieutenant Challice checked his watch. Almost five thirty. But it had already been dark for more than half an hour. It had been only gray before that, and now big snowflakes were falling thickly. They melted as they hit, to gleam wetly on the streets and sidewalks. The windshield wipers, noisy till a moment ago, worked silently under the drone of the siren.

It was a nasty night and Challice didn't relish the idea of slopping around in a vacant lot. Somebody had been very inconsiderate.

The billboard loomed up first. The spotlight, playing toward it, revealed the unseasonable spectacle of a girl in a skimpy swim-

ming suit clutching a bottle of soda pop. Challice shivered.

Patrolman Damiano brought the car to a jolting halt and focused the spotlight on the knot of people behind the billboard. There were half a dozen or so of them, their morbid curiosity stronger than their dislike of the weather. At the approach of the cops, they stepped aside a little. Damiano shoved them a bit farther, and the lieutenant knelt to look at the thing on the ground.

Possibly she'd been pretty, but she wasn't now. She'd been strangled, which had been bad for her face and complexion. And Challice guessed—just a guess—that she hadn't been lying there very long. It couldn't have happened in daylight, even in gray daylight, even in a vacant lot behind a billboard. That meant the girl couldn't have been dead more than half an hour.

Her purse lay under her outflung arm. He removed the purse cautiously, then fished inside it by flashlight. From an identification card he found that the girl's name was Ann Frantz, and he got her address.

The second cruiser had arrived by then, and Challice gave quick instructions to Sergeant Rice. Get statements from the witnesses, especially whoever it was who discovered the body. Later you can begin asking in the stores and houses around here if anybody saw or heard anything. Clear the area and see what you can find on the ground, though probably everything's been trampled by this time. And take care of the corpse.

Then he returned to Damianno's car and explained to headquarters. He was going to the place the girl lived right away. It was only a couple of blocks. He was working on a hunch. But the body was still warm, and maybe the trail was, too. Maybe the girl had been waylaid by a perfect stranger, but then again maybe she hadn't. The purse was still with the body, and there was money in it. And the girl's clothing wasn't torn or anything like that. Just a hunch, but he was going to the girl's house.

He drove. The address turned out to be a large, begrimed brownstone residence that was undoubtedly a rooming house. Challice trotted through the wet and rang the bell. His ring was answered by a gaunt, sixtyish female in a man's sweater. He showed her his police identification right away.

"Ann Frantz live here?" he asked.

"Second floor back," she told him.

"Is she home now?"

"She left for work a little while ago."

"How long? Could you say exactly?"

"Maybe half an hour. What did she do? Is she in trouble?"

He told her Ann Frantz was dead. And he asked to be shown her room.

He was asked in and taken up the badly lighted front stairway. Then his hostess opened a door, flipped a wall switch, and indicated the small room. Challice went inside and glanced around.

He would come back later and make a thorough search. Right now he was interested only in getting a sort of feel for the case. His hunch about the time of death had been right. Now he was looking for something to ride the hunch on a little further. Like a man's picture, for instance.

But he was disappointed. The room was almost as bare and austere as a nun's cell. It offered no indication of the character of its former occupant. There was one picture on the dresser, of a girl and an older woman. Maybe Ann Frantz and her mother. Ann had been pretty enough, neat, almost prim. In the picture she wore a cloth coat.

"How long did she live here?" he asked the landlady.

"About six months now."

"What kind of a girl was she?"

"I don't know. She never talked much."

"Did she have any boyfriends?" That strangling job had been a man's work.

"I never saw any. If she had any, she met 'em somewhere else besides here. This is a respectable place."

"Nobody ever picked her up here?"

"I never saw anybody."

A dead end. Challice could feel his hunch playing out. "You said she was leaving for work," he said. "Where did she work?"

"Esquire Grill. She worked a split shift. She came home after lunch and went back to work just before dinner. Esquire Grill's on Weston, about Thirty-eighth—"

"I've seen the place," Challice said. The pattern was beginning to take shape a little. Ann Frantz had lived within walking distance of her job. There would be people who knew that, knew her habits and her route. Maybe a customer at the Esquire Grill.

"Thanks, and I'll be back," he told the landlady. "Lock this room up and don't let anybody in it."

He saw her lock it, and received her promise to keep it locked. Then he went down to

the car and drove to Thirty-eighth and Weston. On the way he passed the vacant lot. There were more cops there by now. He didn't stop.

The Esquire Grill turned out as he remembered it, a small, crummy place with eight counter stools and three tables. It was six o'clock now, dinner time for most people, but the Esquire Grill had only two customers. Maybe it was the fault of the weather, or maybe the place was off the beaten track. At any rate, Challice wondered why a nice-looking girl like Ann Frantz had to work here.

He parked right in front, and went in and took the first stool. The two customers, both men, occupied one of the farther stools and a chair at one of the tables. A large but not unattractive woman, possibly in her thirties, came down behind the counter and stood opposite the lieutenant. She looked suspicious. She had seen him climb out of a police car. But he showed her his identification anyway.

"Ann Frantz work here?" he asked.

"Yeah, but she ain't here now."

"I can see that. She's supposed to be here, though, isn't she?"

"She usually comes in about five. But she didn't show up today."

He glanced around at the emptiness of the place. "Why do

you bother hiring a waitress?" he wanted to know.

The woman wasn't insulted. "We do a rush business at breakfast and lunch," she explained. "I need her then. But she can show up at night if she wants to. Usually does. Gets her own dinner that way, you see. And she can meet her boyfriends here too." The woman gestured with a side movement of her head to the two male customers.

Challice would tackle the men when he got around to it. "What's your name?" he asked the woman.

"Fern Thomas."

"You own this place?"

"That's right."

"Now let me get this straight. You stay open all day, but Ann Frantz was in the habit of working till after lunch, took off in the afternoons, then came back in the evenings."

"That's right. Six days a week." The woman hesitated. She'd controlled her curiosity so far. Now finally she asked the question. "What's the deal, anyway? Something happen to Ann?"

He nodded. "She's dead."

Without waiting for Fern Thomas's reaction or next question, he got off the stool and took a couple of steps toward the two men. "Either one of you waiting for Ann Frantz?" he asked them.

They exchanged glances between themselves, and then the

man at the table said, "What's it to you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Challice. Police. Miss Frantz is dead."

The man at the table started to get out of his chair and say something, but changed his mind. Both of them just stared for a moment. Then came the stealthy glance between them again, but Challice couldn't read the meaning of it.

"You're kidding," the man on the stool said.

"She's lying in a vacant lot four blocks from here. There's no doubt about her being dead. Probably she was strangled. In other words, murdered. That's why I'm here."

Challice pulled out his notebook then and acquired some information. The man at the table was named Joe Wint. He was thirty-one years old, not married. He drove a transport truck, interstate. So he wasn't in town much. Yes, he dated Ann Frantz whenever he was in town, had been doing it for about three months, ever since she started working here at the Esquire Grill. This was Wednesday. He'd told Ann a week ago he'd be back on Wednesday, and they had a date for tonight. He was a big man, with broad, powerful shoulders and big hands. Kind of good looking in a rough way. Right now he didn't look like a truck driver. He was wearing a

neat blue suit under a tweed overcoat. There seemed to be no mud or other stains on his clothes. His shoes were slightly wet and soiled, but that could happen anywhere on a night like this.

"When did you arrive here?" Challice asked him.

"About twenty to six, I guess."

Fern Thomas, silently questioned, nodded her head in corroboration.

The other man called himself Paul Merson. Twenty-eight, also unmarried. He ate quite a few of his meals here, partly because he worked at the small electrical equipment factory two blocks over. Three nights a week he attended engineering school, and studied during a lot of his spare time. He had managed to date Ann Frantz on the average of two nights a week since she'd been working at the Esquire Grill. He was as tall as Joe Wint but not as heavy, weighed about a hundred and sixty. He was a man who worked with his hands, and they looked strong and capable. He wore glasses, and his face was plain and serious, neither handsome nor ugly. He was wearing a brown suit and a tan topcoat, neither quite as neat as Joe Wint's. But though his shoes were wet too, he showed no certain evidence of having been walking around in a vacant lot.

"When did you arrive here, Mr. Merson?" Challice asked.

"About five minutes before you did, lieutenant."

"Did you have a date with Miss Frantz?"

"Well, no. Wednesday night's a school night for me. I was hoping to see her though."

"Did you know she had another date tonight?"

"Yes, she told me she did. But Joe doesn't always show up. With the bad weather tonight, I was thinking he might not make it back in town."

"What would you have done if he wasn't here?"

"I don't know. I hadn't planned. Maybe ask Ann to meet me somewhere after my class."

"You wanted to talk to her real badly, then?"

"I didn't say that, Lieutenant."

Challice had a decision to make then. He had no information strong enough to classify either of these men as suspects. At least in the technical sense. The fact that they had dated the girl wasn't enough. Nor was the fact that neither of them had been at the Esquire Grill at the time of the murder. They might have alibis elsewhere. Maybe something else would turn up at the scene of the crime. Like a footprint, or any one of a hundred other things. Something that would be real and tangible evi-

dence. Right now, he had nothing but a feeling. Maybe he ought to be somewhere else, like back at the vacant lot supervising the routine. Joe Wint or Paul Merson could be picked up any time. But there was that feeling that told him that the answer to the murder of Ann Frantz was right in the Esquire Grill.

He took Fern Thomas aside, down to the lower end of the counter. "Did this girl have any other boyfriends besides these two?" he asked.

"She went out with a couple of other guys a time or two awhile back."

"But nobody else recently?"

"Not that I know of."

That settled it somehow. The landlady knew of no one. Ann's employer knew of only these two. And that business in the vacant lot was the work of a friend, not a passing stranger. Challice was convinced of that. It was worth a try anyhow.

He went back to the two men. "Both of you," he said, "were interested in Ann Frantz. I guess you're both interested in finding out who killed her."

They nodded cautiously.

"Not many people seem to have known her very well. You two probably knew her better than anybody. There are things about her I've got to find out. You could help me. I'd like a lit-

tle of your time. We can talk right here. And you could drop by the station and make a formal statement later. But for right now, we could make it quick and convenient for everybody. How about it?"

They both agreed. There was the veiled threat of a trip to the station, of course. But maybe they were actually interested in helping out. Or at least one of them might be.

Challice spent a dime at the pay phone telling headquarters where he'd be for the next hour or so. Then he went back to the table where Joe Wint was already sitting, and invited Paul Merson over to join them. He was being unorthodox, he knew. He should question them singly, and later he might do that. But there might be an advantage this way, too. He'd try.

"Hey, Fern," Joe Wint said. "Bring us some coffee."

They waited for the coffee, but nobody settled down and got comfortable. They unbuttoned their coats but kept them on, and just pushed their hats back on their foreheads a little. Challice tried to watch them both equally. He hadn't picked one out yet. They were both nervous and upset. Whether they realized they were suspected, he didn't know. Probably.

The coffee arrived, and Fern Thomas lingered. Challice and

Merson fooled around with the cream and sugar. Joe Wint started to drink his black. Then he made a wry face.

"This stuff's terrible," he told Fern. "How long'd you boil it anyway? Or is it left over from lunch?"

"Sorry," Fern said. "I'll make some fresh."

"Do that," Wint said as she went away. "She usually makes it on the weak side," he told Challice, and he pushed his cup aside. He was more nervous than he looked, and he was making a big issue of the coffee to cover up.

"What can we do to help, lieutenant?" Merson asked. He was tense, but the gaze of his eyes was direct.

"I'm not sure," Challice said truthfully. "But I want to find out everything I can about Ann Frantz. Her habits, her character, her background, her interests, her other friends maybe. You see, from the way it happened, it seemed like she was killed by somebody who knew her, somebody who knew she'd be going by that place at a certain time in the evening. Because she wasn't robbed or disturbed in any way. Just strangled by somebody who had that in mind and nothing else."

"That could mean one of us two," Joe Wint said.

"It could. But I'm making no

accusations. Let me tell you this, though. Anything you could do to help, anything to help us find the real killer, would take the pressure off you."

Challice let that logic sink in a little. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Fern Thomas moving back and forth behind the counter. It seemed as if she wanted to listen to the conversation at the table, but didn't know how to go about it without looking like she was butting in.

"Let me start this way," he said to the two men. "Does either of you know of any other friends Ann Frantz might have had?"

They both shook their heads, and Merson said, "She was a funny girl, lieutenant. Very quiet. Kind of shy, really. I don't think she made friends easily."

"It was just you two, then?"

"As far as I know," Merson said.

"And you two knew about each other?"

"Yes . . ."

"And how did you two find out about each other?"

Joe Wint shrugged. "I guess we ran into each other right here."

"How did you feel about each other? I mean, you both dated Miss Frantz pretty regularly. You were both pretty interested. So how did you like the idea of the other guy being in the picture, too?"

"It didn't make any difference to me," Wint answered quickly.

"How about you, Merson?"

Merson hesitated. He played with his spoon, stirred his coffee. "I was a little jealous," he said finally. "I liked Ann a lot."

"How much did you like her, Wint?" Challice asked, pressing the issue, boring in.

"I liked her, sure. I went out with her, didn't I?"

"If you liked her, why weren't you jealous?"

Now Joe Wint hesitated. "I guess I'm not the kind to get jealous," he said.

"I don't understand."

"Things were different between Ann and me than they were between Paul and her, that's all."

"Would you explain that?"

Joe Wint drummed his fingers on the table top. Challice watched the fingers. They were thick, powerful, the kind that could wrestle a big highway rig all day long.

"I don't get it," Challice repeated. "How were things different?"

Wint turned suddenly to Merson. "Shall I tell him, Paul?" he asked.

Merson looked miserable, embarrassed, half angry. But he controlled himself. "Go ahead, tell him," he answered finally.

"Okay," Wint said, and he turned back to his questioner.

"It was a funny deal, lieutenant. But Paul and I talked this thing over several times. Kind of argued about it sometimes, you might say. Paul argued anyway. He could get pretty mad about it. But it didn't make any difference to me. But once in awhile, you see, we'd both show up here together at the same time. We'd both have come here looking for Ann. A couple of times we both got here, and Ann would be busy, or she wouldn't be here yet. So Paul and I would start talking maybe, and the conversation would get around to Ann."

"Well, tell him if you're going to," Merson interrupted.

"Okay, okay." Joe Wint drank a mouthful of the coffee, made a face as though it were extremely distasteful. "Let's put it this way, lieutenant. Paul and I, we're different types. We go out with a girl, we expect different things. Paul here's the gentleman type. I'm not. You get what I mean? But the funny part is—this is the real funny part, lieutenant—when Paul and I got to talking one night here, it all comes out. Paul says Ann acts a certain way with him, and I say, you're crazy, that girl's got you fooled. It starts a big argument. We got two entirely different pictures of that girl."

Challice watched Paul Merson. The man had grown pale, and the muscles in his jaw could

be seen twitching under the tight skin. There was a small silence after Joe Wint finished.

"How about this, Merson?" Challice had to ask. Merson looked around, and his eyes had fire in them. "Sure, we had arguments," he said. "He was lying about Ann."

"You mean about her . . . character?" Challice probed gently.

"Absolutely."

"Would you describe Ann Frantz for me then, Mr. Merson?"

"She was a good girl; that's all there is to it." Merson spoke quickly, tensely. "I know. I went out with her oftener than he did. I had a couple of dozen dates with her at least. You get to know a girl after a couple of dozen dates. Oh, not everything, sure. But the important things. She never did anything bad in her life. Look, lieutenant, I wanted to marry the girl."

"Did you ask her to marry you?"

"Yes, I did."

"What was her answer?"

Merson hesitated, and there was a kind of hurt look in his eyes. "Ann had had a hard life," he said finally. "Tough breaks, I mean. It made her kind of cautious about jumping into something as big as marriage. But that was what she wanted. A husband and a home—and kids,

too. I know that's what she wanted. Just maybe not from me, that's all. But a girl like that doesn't play around like Joe said."

Challice was trying to sort out his reactions to all this, but he couldn't. Sometimes he had an instinct for which things were true and which were lies, but the instinct wasn't working now.

"Let's see now," he said cautiously. "You two had different ideas about the girl. And you argued about it. But did either of you ever ask the girl?"

"I wouldn't insult her," Merson said.

And Joe Wint laughed. Or it was something like a laugh. A sardonic little explosion of breath. "The argument was too much fun," he said. "So why should we have settled it by asking Ann? If we could have settled it by asking her, that is. Who knows whether she would have told us the truth anyhow? I don't think she would have. But the argument was interesting, lieutenant. Don't you think so? It made Ann kind of mysterious. That's interesting in a woman. Neither Paul or I knew what to believe about Ann. Now you don't either. Right, lieutenant?"

Challice looked at both of them for a minute. Then he said, "The easiest answer is that one of you is lying."

Joe Wint shrugged.

"There are several possibilities, as I see it," Challice went on. "You could be lying, Mr. Wint, because maybe you're just a smart-aleck and a braggart. There are lots of guys who claim to accomplish a lot more with women than they really do. You could be lying, Mr. Merson, to cover up the true situation between you and the girl. Your relationship with her could have been just like Wint's. And then again it's possible, I suppose, that you're both telling the truth. Ann Frantz could have been a different girl at different times with different men. Out for a good time with Wint, and having ideas of respectability and security with Merson. There are women like that."

Joe Wint smiled tautly. "Interesting like I said, isn't it, lieutenant?"

"I'm interested for just one reason," Challice told him. "I want to know which of the possibilities leads to murder."

Wint's smile broadened. "I thought so," he said. "You think one of us did it."

"The thought crossed my mind," Challice admitted.

But he wanted time now. Time to unravel a few things without letting these two beauties off the hook. The feeling was stronger than ever in him. This case could be wrapped up right

here in the Esquire Grill if his groping mind could just suddenly make the right connections.

"You two hang on a minute here," he said finally. "I'll be right back."

He got up from the table and spent another dime on the phone. It was silly, of course, to expect any results from the vacant lot so soon. Headquarters confirmed that there were none.

He went down the counter then and bought a pack of cigarettes from Fern Thomas. He smoked one while he watched her separate the two parts of the glass coffee-maker.

"Want a cup of fresh?" she asked him.

He said he did, and she poured a cup and pushed it across the counter toward him. Then he motioned her not to go away, so she lingered. They were out of earshot of the two men sitting at the rear table.

"What about Ann Frantz?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"Morally, let's say."

Fern Thomas didn't answer right away. Challice had the opportunity to study her. She wasn't too bad looking, though her black hair was probably dyed. On the hefty side, too. A woman who could run a restaurant safely in this neighborhood. But probably not the kind

to whom a lonely girl like Ann Frantz would give her confidence.

"I couldn't say," the woman answered after a moment. "Ann never talked much."

"I get two different stories from the boyfriends," Challice told her.

"What difference does it make?" she asked.

"The truth might give us the motive for the murder."

"You mean one of those two?"

"Maybe."

She still hesitated, but it was obvious she knew something. Challice prodded a little. "It would save us both a lot of trouble, Miss Thomas, if you'd give me your information right here."

She understood all right. She leaned over the counter and talked in a throaty whisper. "As I said, Ann never talked much. But I'll bet I know what Joe Wint said about her. So she must have been his kind of girl. He wouldn't have spent his time with her if she wasn't."

"How do you know that?"

She made the admission without a qualm. "I know Joe," she said.

There was a hard glitter in her eyes. He believed her. "Then what about Merson?" he asked.

"I couldn't say about him. He's just a customer."

Challice watched her then as she poured two more cups of cof-

fee and took them over to the table. He took his own cup with him and joined Merson and Wint.

"Coffee any better?" he heard Fern Thomas ask.

"Yeah, this is more like it," Wint told her.

He waited till the woman left before he began. "Either of you guys want to change anything or add anything to what you said?" he asked them.

Apparently they didn't.

"Okay," he went on. "We're down to this. Unless the crew turns up something, you're my boys. You're my suspects because you were both involved with the dead girl. So I'm stuck with you two. Let's take you first, Mr. Wint."

"What about me?" Joe Wint asked. "Why should I want to kill Ann? I liked things the way they were."

"But maybe things weren't going to stay the way they were. Let's suppose, for instance, the girl wanted to marry you."

Wint shook his head.

"Or maybe she was breaking off with you to marry Merson."

"It wouldn't have made that much difference to me," Wint said confidently. "You'll have to guess again, lieutenant. I didn't kill her."

Challice let him go, and turned to Merson. "I think maybe you were telling the truth, Mr. Merson," he said. "About you and

Ann Frantz. But maybe you believed what Wint kept telling you about Ann. Jealousy is one of the best motives there is for murder."

Paul Merson didn't smile. His face was pale and there was perspiration on his forehead and upper lip. "I didn't kill her," he said.

Challice leaned his chair back on its rear legs and lit a cigarette. He didn't offer the cigarettes around. He wasn't feeling very friendly or polite. He was already impatient, and now anger and frustration were stirring in him. It was here. The answer was right here. He almost wished the law would let him apply the proper pressure to these characters.

But instead—because he had to—he kept the kid gloves on. "Okay," he said, "let's go about it scientifically. Let's talk about alibis. You first, Mr. Wint."

Joe Wint was ready. As if he'd been expecting this and had already sorted everything out in his mind. "I rolled into town at four thirty," he said. "I turned the rig in at our Union Street warehouse. Regal Truck Lines, you can check it. By five I was at the place I live. Mrs. Schneider, 518 Terry Avenue. I took a shower, shaved, got my car from Mrs. Schneider's garage, and I got here at twenty to six."

"Wouldn't that have been too early to pick up Ann?"

"Not if there was no business here."

"What's yours, Mr. Merson?" Challice ground out his cigarette fiercely.

"I worked till five."

"Okay, I can check that. But you arrived here about five minutes to six. Your work is only two blocks from here. What did you do in that fifty-five minutes?"

"Well, I came right over here," Merson said. "But the place was locked up. So I went home, changed my clothes, and came back."

For a second or two, Challice thought he'd heard it wrong. "What did you say?" he asked kind of stupidly. "The place was locked up? What time was that?"

"Maybe five fifteen."

And it was as simple as that. Just as he'd known all along, the answer had been here all the time. Challice got up from the table, and he didn't bother to excuse himself. He left the two men, and he walked down the aisle toward the front entrance of the Esquire Grill. There beside the door was a pair of women's galoshes.

He picked them up and looked them over carefully. They were meticulously, almost surgically clean. He held them in his hands for a moment. Then he came

back to the counter and laid them there in front of Fern Thomas.

"These have just been scrubbed clean," he told her.

She didn't answer him, but just stared at the galoshes.

"You forgot and left the coffee on while you were gone," he said. "And you washed these things when you came back. There were no customers here when you left and you thought you wouldn't be missed. But Paul Merson came by earlier than usual and found the place locked up. What was it, Miss Thomas? Jealousy of Ann Frantz because of her and Joe Wint being real close?"

Fern Thomas was a big woman, not too bad looking, even counting the dyed hair. Those were things Challice had already noticed. But now for the first time he looked at her hands. They were big and strong-look-

ing, as capable as almost any man's.

So he got the murderer of Ann Frantz. But the trouble was, it didn't stop him from thinking about that girl . . . how, if she'd been the kind Paul Merson thought she was, the murder had been a mistake—a useless, silly, sad mistake . . . how, if she'd been Joe Wint's girl, at least Fern Thomas had had a basis for what she'd done . . . or, if by chance both Wint and Merson had told the truth and Ann Frantz was getting ready to give up Wint and marry Merson, she could probably have saved her life if she'd told Fern Thomas about it.

Lieutenant Challice was a good cop, a smart cop. Maybe he could have dug, and answered those questions. But he had the killer, and a working cop doesn't have time for the academic details. Because there are people getting murdered every day.

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# Miss Chandler's Mistake

by Josephine Bell

Margery Chandler stood up when the others stood up and waited quietly in the background for the spate of conversation and comment to work itself out and for someone to notice her continued presence there. But the relatives and beneficiaries of the late Mrs. Stevens were too much roused by the reading of the will to turn their attention from its interesting contents to the person of the deceased's companion. They had taken Miss Chandler for granted throughout her ten years of devoted service to the old lady who had just enriched them by her departing. On their infrequent visits to Mrs. Stevens they had always tried to show the companion the same politeness and limited attention that they would give to any other of their acquaintance, and they were quite prepared to do the same now. Only for the moment they had forgotten her, because each had received—certainly not a fortune but considerably more than they had dared to hope. They were all seven of them a little overexcited, a little tremulous at finding that their aunt, or great-aunt (for Mrs. Stevens had no direct descendants living), had cut up so surprisingly well. They laughed, they wiped their eyes, they patted one another and linked arms, and all the time they exploded into fragments of speech.

"Jessie, I am so glad for your rake! It will make all the difference to Peter's education, won't it?"

"I must say I never imagined—"

"Cecil, I thought she had put it all in an annuity—"

"No, dear. That was Aunt Jane."

"Oh, that awful tea service! Yes, I remember."

In the end it was the family solicitor who recalled his clients to their duty.

"I think," he murmured to the eldest male relative, "that Miss Chandler will be wanting to leave. I—er—it will take some time before we get probate. The small legacy—I wondered if it would meet with your wishes for me to give it to her now. Her circumstances—"

The eldest relative looked vague, but his wife, who had been

listening, answered for him. "I agree, certainly. I'm sure the others will, too."

She spoke to one or two of them in a low voice; they nodded their heads in assent. "Miss Chandler," she went on, turning to the companion and raising her voice, "it has been suggested that perhaps you might like to receive your legacy before you leave us for good this afternoon. We are all extremely grateful to you for your excellent care and companionship of my aunt during the latter part of her life, and we should like to show that gratitude in any way we can. It might be a convenience to you while waiting for another post—or perhaps you have already got one—"

"No," said Miss Chandler, quietly coming forward, "I have not got one yet."

"Then I expect you would like—we would like—Mr. Hall is quite prepared to advance—because after all the amount is—is—"

"Is very small," said Miss Chandler gently.

The relatives looked profoundly shocked, but they could not dispute the truth of this statement. The one called Jessie said in a flustered way,

"Aunt left her Bible as well to Miss Chandler. I'm sure I don't know where Aunt's Bible is. Shall I ring the bell? Would the maid—?"

"I will fetch it," answered Miss Chandler. "I know where it is. After all," she added with a little smile, "I have read out of it every night for ten years."

An uncomfortable silence followed her exit from the room. One relative said petulantly, "Did she expect to cut us all out of the will? After all, ten pounds is ten pounds."

"And the Bible, too. That is a sign of Aunt's affection," Cecil's wife said. "She ought to consider herself lucky to get anything. Doesn't she realize Aunt bought herself an annuity?"

"No, dear, that was Aunt Jane."

"What? Oh yes, how stupid of me. You said so before."

Miss Chandler came back carrying the late Mrs. Stevens' Bible and a small suitcase. She had put on her hat and coat and was ready to leave. Mr. Hall, the solicitor, took a wad of notes from his breast pocket and handed them to her.

"I have brought notes," he said, "instead of a check. I thought you might prefer it."

"Yes," she answered, "I have no banking account."

She took the notes and began to put them away in her bag.

"Better count them," suggested Cecil.

She took them out again obediently, and did so twice.

"You have given me a note too much. The will said ten pounds."

"Guineas," said Mr. Hall firmly.

"I thought it was pounds," said Cecil's wife.

"Yes, pounds," agreed Jessie.

"It was guineas," repeated Mr. Hall, pressing the note back into Miss Chandler's hand. "I am quite certain that I am right—so sure of it, indeed, that I am prepared to back my mistake personally, if it is one. That should convince everyone present that I am not in error."

Miss Chandler knew that he would be as good as his word; she also knew that the amount of her legacy was ten pounds. She gave Mr. Hall a grateful smile as she handed back the receipt, thanked him, and shook his proffered hand. The relatives copied his example and also shook hands with her. Cecil went with her to the door of the room.

"Please don't come any farther," she said. "I will see myself out the front door."

"Your luggage?"

"Carter Patterson took my trunk yesterday. I am going to my married sister at first. I have only this suitcase. Thank you. Good-bye."

As she crossed the hall, she heard the murmur of their voices rise again. They had recovered from their temporary embarrassment.

She stood on the steps of the house where she had lived for ten years. She had been twenty-four when she first came there. A taxi cruised slowly past. The driver slowed down at sight of her suitcase, but she shook her head. He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously at the meanness of women and drove on. Miss Chandler clutched her bag, took a firmer hold of the suitcase, and walked away up the street.

Margery Chandler stayed with her sister at her small, neat, new-estate home for several weeks. She answered countless advertisements, but all to no purpose. It seemed as if lady companions, no longer quite young, were a glut on the market. She knew that her sister resented her prolonged visit, and found her boring because she would not go upon shopping expeditions where she could not afford to buy anything, or to cinemas

which she considered an unwarranted luxury. Her last month's wages gradually disappeared for board and necessary expenses. She looked in her purse and counted the poor legacy Mrs. Stevens had left her. It had already been diminished by the price of a new pair of shoes. With a sign of despair, she returned to the advertisement lists and worked slowly through them. There seemed to be nothing remotely suitable. Then she paused.

"It's in here again, Florrie."

"That advert, do you mean?"

"Yes, the one we've always turned down. That's three weeks running it's been here, at least."

"Looks as if they found it a job to get someone. What's wrong with it from your point of view?"

"It says nurse-companion. I'm not qualified."

Florence Sims leaned over her sister's shoulder. She was several years younger than Margery, and as positive and self-assured as the latter was diffident. Though, after the death of their mother, Margery had looked after her younger sister singlehanded, and singlehanded six years later had seen her father through his last illness, she felt acutely her lack in training in any technique, however humble. When Florence protested her belief in her sister's experience, acquired through sixteen years of housekeeping and companionship with young and old, chronic invalid and dying parent, Margery frowned in anxious disagreement, but she bent once more over the newspaper and read the familiar lines.

*"Nurse-Companion. Wanted immediately. Take full charge elderly lady—bed-ridden—invalid. Experience essential. Terms by arrangement. Apply Hughes and Purvis, Solicitors. Gray's Inn Rd. W.C.2."*

Florence pointed with her finger. "It says immediately. Did you notice that? It wasn't in before. It's my belief they can't get anyone to take it on. You could probably make a good thing of it. 'Terms by arrangement.' You could stick out for a decent screw for once. Why don't you have a shot at it? It wouldn't hurt you to find out a little more about it, would it?"

"I don't know how I could call myself a nurse."

"Oh, very well. But don't say I didn't advise you. Of course, you're welcome to stay here for the rest of your life if you want to."

It being so painfully obvious from the vigorous way in which Florence was dusting the mantelpiece that her welcome had already outlived itself, Margery's eyes filled with tears and she gazed

miserably at the advertisement, which had become a dismal blur before her eyes.

"I think perhaps I will write and ask for more detail," she said in a small voice.

"Why not ring up for an appointment? It'd be worth half a dozen letters."

"All right. I might as well."

"I'll get the number for you if you like."

Florence hurried out into the hall. Margery sat on, thinking of her youth spent in hard unrewarding work and of her future, uncertain and bleak. Her sister came bouncing back to her.

"I've fixed it for you. Two thirty this afternoon." She saw the misery in Margery's face and felt ashamed of herself.

"It isn't that I don't want you here. Honest, it isn't. It's Bob, really. It bothers him, having visitors for long. But don't let that influence you. If you don't like the look of the job when you see it, turn it down. We'll find something else."

Margery patted the hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right, Florrie. Perhaps it'll be just the job I want. Anyway, I'd like to be working again. I'm not used to being idle."

Florence gave her sister's shoulder a final pat and went away singing cheerfully. Margery laid her sad face down on her arms and wept.

**J**ohn Hughes, senior partner of Hughes and Purvis, sat at his desk near the window of his room.

The offices of the firm of Hughes and Purvis, solicitors, were on the first floor of a large building in the Gray's Inn Road, an old fashioned building made of grimy stone with tall, deep-set windows and a narrow pillared porch sheltering a flight of steep steps. Swing doors with glass upper halves clapped perpetually at the top of these steps, while a public telephone box just inside them proclaimed a desire to keep up with the times and to serve the convenience of clients hampered by the gloom and obscurity of the place.

The firm's business consisted of problems arising out of insurance of all kinds, and it was with one such matter that Mr. Hughes was struggling when his partner, Fred Purvis, came in carrying some papers.

"If you have anything to tell me more important than the Ferris

car crash, you can do so; otherwise, for God's sake don't interrupt me," said Hughes, not looking up.

"Well, I have. Another Standish claim."

Purvis threw down a wad of letters clipped together at one corner. Hughes glanced through them rapidly, making swift comment as he did so.

"Godfrey Standish . . . he crops up everywhere, doesn't he? How does he know about these things so quickly? This burglary took place on the tenth in the small hours of the morning. Standish's letter embodying the claim was sent to the insurance company on the tenth. It reached them in the afternoon of the same day. That burglary could not have been in the morning papers on the tenth. It would be in the evening ones, perhaps. But the lady who had her furs stolen was nobody in particular. Was it in the papers at all?"

"We can find out," answered Purvis, making a note of it.

"Now, look at this claim. Some of the furs must have been older than others, but these without exception are the prices of new ones. The man's methods are distressingly monotonous and persistent.

"So is the company. But they score off him this time. Look. Silver Fox cape two hundred fifty guineas. Sable tie one hundred twenty-five pounds. He has overreached himself there. Mrs. Panton may be ignorant or may have been misinformed. As she has lost her fur, we'll give her the benefit of the doubt. But in sober fact her husband, when he insured the furs, deliberately refused to insure these two items. Turn over—you'll see! There!"

Hughes read the letter from the insurance company, and a broad and satisfied grin spread over his face.

"They tried to persuade him to insure the valuable pieces with the rest," he quoted, "but Mr. Panton said these particular furs were so carefully looked after that it was unnecessary to insure them, and though it was pointed out to him that the difference in the premium was negligible, he still refused to consider covering them!"

Hughes slapped the letter with his hand and laughed heartily.

"So we are to break the sad news to Mr. Standish that his principal claim falls flat. This is the happiest moment of the last fortnight. But there are still two things I want to know. First, Mrs. Panton knew or did not know the terms of the insurance, and second, how did Standish get onto this burglary as quickly as he did?"

"I could ring the lady up and find out the answer to the first of those questions."

Purvis called a number and asked his question. As he put down the receiver he said, "As I thought. The lady assures me all the furs are insured. Her husband is abroad, that is why they are employing an agent to make her claim for her."

Hughes did not answer. He was looking at a photograph on his table. Without turning he said quietly, "Do you generally omit to knock before you come into the room, Cope?"

Purvis swung round and saw one of the clerks standing just inside the door. The man was startled and stammered as he answered, "I did knock, sir."

"Then knock louder next time," answered Hughes, "and wait till you hear me answer. What is it?"

"A Miss Chandler, sir. She rang up for an appointment. To answer an advert, she said."

"Miss—? Yes, I know. I shall be ready for her in five minutes. Wait! You can take a letter to Miss Gregory. I want it to go at once."

He scribbled busily for a few seconds and handed the sheet of paper folded in half to the waiting clerk, who took it and disappeared through the door.

"I've been wondering about that young man," said Hughes thoughtfully. "He's been here a year. He's quite efficient, quiet, and polite. And he came in just now on purpose to hear us talking."

Purvis nodded. "Idle curiosity or—what?"

"I don't know." Hughes drummed on the desk with his fingers. "I may be fanciful, but I think our friend Standish resents us. We know that our friend Standish is very quick in his movements, very much on the spot. He must have means of communication and information; it would be impossible otherwise."

"You think that young Cope is one of them?"

"I don't know, I tell you. But if he is, we may gather how he works. He cannot fail to be interested in that letter I have just sent out for Miss Gregory to type. It informs the lady with the furs (or rather, without them) that her husband did not insure them all. You might keep an eye on Cope, Purvis. Take him with you next time you have a job outside. Give him a drink and get him to talk."

Next door in the clerks' office Cope carried the folded paper to Miss Gregory and spread it out before her.

"They want it typed and sent off at once," he said, bending over it to flatten it out better.

"Who's they?"

"Mr. Hughes and Mr. Purvis."

"What? Both of them? It must be important. Here, take your face away. Who's going to type this, you or me? Think I can see through the back of your head?"

Cope scowled at her but moved away. As he did so, Miss Chandler, who was waiting at the far end of the room, half-rose from her chair. The clerk went up to her.

"Mr. Hughes will be free in about five minutes' time," he said, and went back to his own table. He sat thinking for a minute, glancing from time to time at Miss Gregory. But she had already finished the letter and, drawing it from the typewriter, went with it to the door of Mr. Hughes's room, knocked, and was admitted by Mr. Purvis, who came out and disappeared through another door into his own room. Miss Chandler half-rose again as he appeared but seeing no response on his face sank down again.

A moment later Miss Gregory came out and, standing in the doorway, beckoned with the hand that held the now signed letter.

"Will you come this way, please," she said briskly.

Margery Chandler clutched her gloves and bag, nervously adjusted her cheap fur, and walked forward with a sinking heart.

The door closed behind her. She saw a thick-set man in a grey suit sitting at an office desk. His broad face lifted as she went in, and a pair of unusually intelligent eyes darted sharply over her face and figure. The nervousness she had felt sitting in the outer room among the clerks was doubled by this keen inspection of her person; she knew that her face was screwing itself up most unbecomingly, but she could not help it, nor stop the trembling of her hands. The man at the desk looked disappointed and disgusted. He picked up a letter lying before him.

"You are Miss Chandler?"

"Yes."

"Sit down, please."

She obeyed, sitting on the edge of a chair exactly opposite to his on the other side of the desk.

"You have applied for the post of nurse-companion, as advertised by me. Are you a nurse?"

"N-No—not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"I am not a qualified nurse."

"Do you mean that you broke your training, or that you couldn't pass the exams?"

"I—I haven't had any real training—I mean—no hospital training—"

"None at all?"

"No."

"Then what do you mean by wasting my time?"

"I have had some years of experience—I thought—of course, I don't know what type of case—But I thought—I might—after so long—"

"How many years of experience have you had?"

"Altogether, do you mean, counting Mother and Father?"

Mr. Hughes sank deeper into his chair and glared at her. Miss Chandler hurried on.

"I was with Mrs. Stevens for ten years, but for the first six she was quite all right, only irritable sometimes and very faddy about her food. But I put up with all that because after Father died—"

"Did you nurse your father in his last illness?"

"Yes. Of course, it was not like Mother's illness. That was six years before, but Father was never quite the same after Mother died."

"Did you nurse your mother, too?"

"Oh yes. For six months. It was a cancer. She didn't take it in time, the doctor said. Father was only ill a fortnight—pneumonia on top of flu."

"But this Mrs.—Stevens. You say she was well for six years, more or less. After that she was ill?"

"Yes. She had a stroke."

"Ah." Mr. Hughes looked gratified. "Was she badly disabled?"

"Yes, at first. Afterwards she recovered the use of her limbs except for a little weakness in one arm and leg. It made her nervous getting about; she liked to have me handy all the time."

"I see." Mr. Hughes looked at her speculatively. In talking of Mrs. Stevens her nervousness had disappeared and her face looked animated and almost pretty. Now that his eye was on her again, she relapsed into her former state of panic.

"Well," Mr. Hughes said, stabbing at the blotting paper with his pencil, "I don't think you had the slightest justification for answering that advertisement, but since you are here I will tell you



IN TALKING OF MRS. STEVENS HER NERVOUSNESS HAD DISAPPEARED AND HER FACE LOOKED ANIMATED AND ALMOST PRETTY. NOW THAT HIS EYE WAS ON HER AGAIN, SHE RELAPSED INTO HER FORMER STATE OF PANIC.

about the post. It is another case of apoplexy but much more severe. In this lady the stroke has caused almost complete paralysis; she can move her hands a little, her legs not at all. Besides this, her speech has been so badly affected that she cannot really talk at all. She makes sounds, but not intelligible ones. At present she is in a hospital, but she is very unhappy there. She has no relations. I propose moving her to a small flat where she would be in charge of a companion capable of nursing her. I would provide a half-time daily maid to do the housework and cooking in the morning. The companion could go out if necessary in the morning, and I would arrange one afternoon a week free. If you had not already nursed a similar but milder case, I would not be prepared to consider your application, since you are not trained."

"You haven't found it easy to get anyone, either, have you?" said Miss Chandler.

Mr. Hughes looked up sharply.

"I mean, the advertisement has been in a good many times, hasn't it? So the trained nurses haven't been very eager to take it up, and I'm not surprised."

"Oh," said Mr. Hughes. The corners of his mouth twitched a little. "You've been studying the advertisements for some time yourself, have you? Not been so easy to get a job, eh?"

Margery Chandler looked dashed, then she smiled ruefully. "The case and I seem to be just about suited," she said.

Mr. Hughes's face softened for a moment, then he frowned. At last he made up his mind.

"I'll take you along to the hospital," he said. "You can see her. If you feel you can tackle it, and she doesn't take a violent dislike to you, I'll give you a trial. I must just speak a word to my partner. I will meet you at the front door downstairs if you will go ahead."

He held open the door of his room, and Miss Chandler went out feeling bewildered but excited. She made her way downstairs and, as she reached the hall, noticed the telephone box standing there. She thought she would telephone her sister to explain how matters stood, and felt in her purse for two pennies. Then she remembered that she did not know her sister's present telephone number. There was a man using the telephone; he had his back to her, but Miss Chandler recognized one of the clerks belonging to Hughes and Purvis, the one who had told her Mr. Hughes would soon be free. She crept up to the box so as not to disturb him and drew towards her the telephone directory on its string. Alas, it was only the half

from A to L. The other was caught inside the door. After a moment's hesitation, she gently pulled open the door and caught hold of the volume she needed. She heard the clerk's voice saying in low urgent tones, "Hughes has written—"; then he noticed her, whipped round, and pulled the door shut. Miss Chandler, who had managed to avoid by a little having her fingers pinched, began to look up Florrie's number. She would have been astonished if she had heard the clerk's next words, spoken almost in a whisper:

"Are you still there? Sorry, I was interrupted. Can you hear me? I've got to speak low. There's a woman outside—opened the door of the box a second ago. She's just been interviewing Hughes—yes—I don't know. I have an idea she's waiting on purpose. I think he's up to some new game. See you this evening. Right, I will."

He left the box with a polite nod to Miss Chandler, who went in to telephone to her sister and tell her that there was some hope of getting the job. A few seconds after she had finished her call, Mr. Hughes came downstairs.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said curtly and crossed the hall with long strides. Miss Chandler shot forward to catch him up. He held the swing door open after him, but without looking back, so that Miss Chandler, reaching it just too late before he let it go, was nearly knocked down by the force of the rebound. She struggled bravely through, however, and ran out into the street where Mr. Hughes was already hailing a taxi.

Rather breathless, Miss Chandler sank back into her corner and pulled her hat more firmly on her head.

"Sorry to rush you," said Mr. Hughes accusingly. "Trying to make up for lost time. Had to keep you waiting."

"I didn't notice it," said Miss Chandler, again overcome with nervousness. "I was telephoning to my sister not to expect me home. I mean—to expect me when she saw me. I had just finished when you came down."

"You must have had a lot to say to her," remarked Mr. Hughes, "if you took all that time on the phone."

"Oh no. You see, I couldn't start at once, because of the man—because of your clerk being there already."

Mr. Hughes turned to her with real interest.

"How did you know it was one of my clerks?"

"Because he told me when you would be ready to see me—in the office—before."

"I see." Mr. Hughes's eyes were gleaming.

"Besides," Miss Chandler went on, "when I opened the door of the telephone box to get out the directory which was caught inside, he mentioned your name. He said—"

"Go on," ordered Mr. Hughes eagerly.

"He said, 'Hughes has written,' and then I had got the book unstuck so of course I shut the door at once because I wouldn't willingly listen to anyone's private con—"

"You're a complete fool!" said Mr. Hughes rudely and glared straight before him.

Miss Chandler was shocked and horrified. She had thoughts of tapping on the window and asking the driver to put her down, but before she could make up her mind the taxi stopped and Mr. Hughes jumped out. Very reluctantly she followed.

**I**n the hall of the hospital Mr. Hughes produced his card and spoke to the girl at the enquiry office. Soon after, her head appeared at the window.

"Sister says will you go up to the ward," she said. "Do you know your way?"

"Yes, I do," answered Mr. Hughes and strode off.

Miss Chandler toiled after him up several flights of stairs until they stopped at the ward door. A nurse came forward and led them to a bed surrounded by screens. They went inside, and Miss Chandler saw a little old woman, her face drawn down on one side, lying helplessly on her back. Her eyes brightened as she saw Mr. Hughes and her lips moved feebly, but no words came. He patted the hand that lay stiffly on the bedcover.

"I've brought Miss Chandler to see you," he said. "She is very good at nursing and she wants to look after you. Do you think you feel well enough to go to that flat I've got for you?"

The old woman put out her right hand with a jerky movement and touched Margery Chandler's arm. The ward sister came round the screen and looked at her too. Mr. Hughes watched the three women.

Sister turned to him and said quietly, "She's just longing to get away and get settled quietly by herself. I have to keep the screens round because it upsets her to see the others talking and moving about. But of course then she feels boxed in."

"Miss Chandler is proposing to look after her," said Mr. Hughes. "I have got the flat all ready."

"Then the sooner she's moved the better," said Sister. "The doctor

says she will stay like this indefinitely provided no complications set in. Personally, I think if she goes on fretting as she is now she'll do herself real harm."

A nurse came up to the screens and Sister went away. Miss Chandler looked from the patient to Mr. Hughes.

"I will look after her if she will have me," she said simply.

Again the old woman's hand came out tremblingly and rested on Margery's sleeve.

"She seems to think you'll do," said Mr. Hughes. He bent over the bed and spoke slowly and carefully. "Would you like Miss Chandler to look after you, Nanny?"

"Nanny!" repeated Margery Chandler. So it was his old nurse he was providing with a flat and a companion and daily help. It was his old nurse, who had no relations living and was miserable at the hospital away from her own cherished possessions. She looked down at his broad back and her eyes softened.

"She'll have you," said Mr. Hughes, straightening up. "I shall have to get back to the office, but if you will come back with me, we can settle details on the way."

Miss Chandler stopped and took the old woman's hand in her own.

"I will do my best—Nanny," she said gently.

About an hour later Mr. Hughes walked into the back offices of the Salvo Fire and Accident Insurance Company. He passed down the strip of marble paving beside which, screened by glass, innumerable clerks sat in rows writing, typing, sorting, filing, passing baskets of papers to and fro, occasionally getting up to walk along the lines and ask advice from superior beings who sat isolated in special glass cages of their own. Soon he reached his goal, the room of the manager director himself, and was joined by a clerk who led him in.

Mr. Hughes walked across the thick carpet and shook hands with the grey-haired man at the desk. "Well, Hughes," said the latter, "I realize it must be some news of importance to bring you down here in person. Let's have it."

Hughes wasted no time but told briefly of his recent encounters with the self-styled claims assessor Godfrey Standish, and of his suspicion of his recently acquired clerk, Cope. He described the results of Miss Chandler's unintentional eavesdropping at the telephone. Merriman whistled softly.

"You gave him the rough draft of your letter to us to take out to your typist?"

"Yes."

"So he could have read it on the way."

"If he was quick, yes."

"What do you propose to do?"

Hughes leaned forward.

"Listen. This fellow Standish is getting more and more preposterous in his claims. You have careful investigations made, and I am able to protect you pretty frequently when it comes to points of law. But the smaller companies are not so well looked after. In which case it is sheer fraud if his claims go through, as I've no doubt they do. Now it is obvious my man Cope is getting a rakeoff for news supplied. We know too that Standish has sources of information that keep him posted on fires, burglaries, and so on. He must have to get on the spot the way he does. But we haven't got a thing we can pin on to him direct. If we go to the police at this stage, they will probably pooh-pooh the whole thing. If not, Standish will undoubtedly pull in his horns and sit tight till the investigation blows over. No—we must do our own investigation."

"How?"

"Use one of your clerks. A young man in a junior position for preference, but one you feel sure of as far as loyalty and courage are concerned. Send him down to my office before my clerks leave and let him wait outside and follow Cope. I'll give you a description of him. I'd like very much to know my Mr. Cope's friends."

Merriman's face twitched with excitement.

"I will," he said firmly. "I'll do more. I'll put the whole of this investigation in your hands, and guarantee your expenses. I know the very lad who'll suit you. Young Kain. I've had him two years. I'll send for him at once."

He stretched out his hand to the bell, but Hughes stopped him.

"You may have one or two Copes in your own works for all we know," he warned him. "Wait till I've been gone some time, and get Kain sent to you with papers from his department, if you can wangle it that way."

Merriman laughed.

"You'll have me in a false beard before you're through," he said.

"You never know," answered Hughes.

"You'll see Kain on your way out," went on Merriman. "Let me

see—yes, fourth from the entrance door in the second row from the front."

Mr. Hughes walked back along the marble flooring. He counted down the second row. Three dull middle-aged faces, bent over their work. The fourth stool was empty, but as he watched, Mr. Hughes saw a figure returning along the back of the row. Just before sitting down, the figure surreptitiously produced a small catapult from his pocket, took swift aim, and fired. A clerk at the other end of the line clapped his hand to his head and looked round. The young man dived onto his seat, catching as he did so Mr. Hughes's astonished eye. The clerk was no less astonished; his intelligent face went blank, then he grinned apologetically. Mr. Hughes grinned back. Young Kain would do.

**M**iss Gregory put the cover on her typewriter and went away to get her coat and hat. Cope did the same. He lingered beside her table in passing but, finding her baskets empty, passed swiftly on and down the stairs. In the street he paused at the foot of the steps, looked to right and left, and, turning right, walked away. Kain of the Salvo Insurance Company fell in behind him.

Presently Cope turned into a pub and went up to the bar. Kain followed and eased himself in beside him. Then a man came up to Cope on the other side and began to talk to him in a low voice. Kain stared moodily before him, taking no notice.

"Looks a bit down in the mouth," said Cope's friend.

"Who?" said Cope.

The friend nudged him, and the clerk glanced round. Kain raised his glass and without changing the direction of his gaze said aloud with great bitterness, "Damnation to the whole bunch of them!" and, draining it in one gulp, ordered another.

"Pardon me, but that sounds bad," said Cope in a friendly way. "You're not referring to present company, I hope."

"Oh, no," answered Kain recklessly, "only my employers."

"Who may they be, if it's no offense to ask?"

"Salvo. Bloody lot of swindlers!" He emptied his glass again.

Cope and his friend raised their eyebrows and nodded.

"Have another one on me," suggested Cope. "What about you, George?"

"No, I'd better be getting along. See you later."

Cope nodded and turned to Kain. "Come over to a table. Less crowd."

The two settled down, and young Kain was invited to air his grievances, which he did with gusto and a fluent invention.

"All these jobs are shockingly underpaid," said Cope indignantly, "but it's not much good complaining. Only lose your job. Vested interests, you know, you can't touch 'em. The best thing is to make a bit in your spare time—as I do."

"How?" Kain spoke sulkily, but his quick eyes were on the other's face.

"You've just said the claims are often turned down unfairly. I agree with you. I agree that the insurance companies deserve to be stung from time to time. I know a man who sticks up for his clients' claims and gets them, too. He's a fair marvel." He lowered his voice. "He's got agents everywhere, and he pays—handsomely. We call him the Boss. He's a real boss, I can tell you. No meanness there. If you're on the lookout for overtime, I might put you in touch—"

**M**iss Chandler left her post at the window of Nanny's room and went close to the bed on which the old woman lay.

"He's just coming," she said cheerfully. "I'll go and put my hat on."

She left the room, and a moment later Mr. Hughes was shown in by the daily help, Mrs. Durley, a stout, short woman in a flowered overall worn over a woollen jumper.

"She's putting 'er 'at on," said Mrs. Durley, half in and half out of the door. "I'll tell 'er you're 'ere."

But there was no need of this, for Miss Chandler appeared again, wearing the same hat in which she had gone to her interview. Mr. Hughes shook hands with her and asked about the patient. Miss Chandler described a general improvement and said that the doctor, who came now once a week, was quite satisfied.

"Well, don't stay now," said Mr. Hughes at the end of her report. "You must try to be back at eight."

They walked out of the room and stood in the passage. Miss Chandler said nervously, "Oh, yes. Eight. Do you think you can manage about tea? I mean, Mrs. Durley can't stop, because she goes on to—"

"Of course I can manage."

"I'm sure it's very kind of you. I was quite prepared to stay in when Miss Lucas found she could not go on coming."

"No, you can't expect to do your work properly if you don't get time off. That's only common sense. Until I find another substitute, I shall come myself. I've brought work to do. I suppose you don't sit with the old lady all the time."

"Oh no. She wouldn't like that. She generally sleeps in the afternoon. Then I get her tea and read aloud to her or turn on the wireless—"

"Right. I shall manage."

"Then I'll just say goodbye to her."

Miss Chandler went back into the bedroom, and Mr. Hughes watched her from the door straightening the old woman's bed-clothes and making her pillows comfortable. As she passed him again on her way out, he gave her an unexpectedly warm smile that brought the blood into her cheeks and made her fumble with the door. When she had got it open and looked back, he had disappeared into the sitting room of the flat.

Some hours later Miss Chandler pushed slowly into a large West End Lyons. She had done some shopping, the first since she had started her new job, and had recklessly spent the greater part of her month's wages on a new hat, some stockings, a pair of indoor slippers, and a, for her, unusually frivolous set of Celanese undies.

The restaurant was very full and hardly less noisy than the street she had just left. A tzigane band crashed out Bohemian music at the far side of the enormous room. Miss Chandler threaded her way between the tables, ignored by ladies in long black satin who preferred to help large parties or members of the opposite sex until she reached a corner where two adults and a child were seated, using the fourth seat as a depository for their own parcels and handbags. They were deep in conversation and did not notice her until she timidly drew out the laden chair, whereupon they pounced at their property and swept it away with indignant shrugs and martyred expressions.

"I'm sorry," said Miss Chandler faintly above the din of the band. "But it's so crowded, you know."

The two women nodded absently and went on with their talk. Miss Chandler took up the menu. She was going to have a pot of tea and for a special treat, crumpets. Yes, there they were, halfway down the long list of toasted foods. She glanced about her for a

waitress; at last one came. Timidly she gave her order. "A pot of Indian tea and I think crumpets would be nice. Two crumpets."

"Crumpets are off."

"What did you say?"

"Crumpets are off. There aren't any left."

"Oh, dear." Miss Chandler was so disappointed that the tears nearly rose to her eyes. She had planned this treat a month ago, on the day she took up her new job. She had spent the first three weekly half-days at her sister's house in order to save up for her expedition to the West End, and now there were no crumpets.

"I don't know what to have," she said helplessly. The band had stopped playing, and her voice rang out embarrassingly loud. The waitress looked bored.

"Toast?" she suggested curtly.

"All right."

"White or brown?"

"Er—brown—no, white, please."

With a gesture of contempt the waitress took up her tray and went off. Presently the other occupants of the table gathered themselves together and assembled their parcels.

"Excuse me," said Miss Chandler. "That parcel is one of mine."

"Pardon?"

"I said that parcel is mine. It's my new hat."

The older of the two women opened the mouth of the bag, half drew out Miss Chandler's new modest felt, exclaimed, "My God, she's right!" and thrusting it back, restored the bag to Miss Chandler. The small boy was discovered rolling the correct bag along the floor, was checked, reprimanded, and led away protesting. Miss Chandler lovingly set her parcel to rights and rearranged her other belongings. Still no tea appeared. At last she plucked up sufficient courage to accost another waitress.

"I don't do your table," the girl said. "I'll tell her."

A minute later a new girl appeared.

"Oh, but it wasn't you—" began Miss Chandler, but the girl interrupted her.

"She's gone off," she explained. "I've just come on. Did she take your order?"

"Yes, Indian tea and toast, white toast. But I really wanted crumpets," said Miss Chandler wistfully.

The girl nodded and went away. A few minutes later she was back with a full tray, pot of Indian tea, cup and saucer, milk jug,

and, to Miss Chandler's astonishment and joy, two crumpets under a cover.

"It was muffins was off," explained the waitress, smiling.

"Oh, thank you, thank you very much indeed. It was most kind of you to make inquiries," said Margery Chandler. The girl was touched. She went away and came back with an evening newspaper. "Like to look at the paper?" she suggested.

Miss Chandler accepted with pleasure. On the front page, accompanied by a large picture, she found an account of a fire. A shop near Tottenham Court Road had been gutted. No lives had been lost, but extensive damage had been done to the stock. The fire must have started in the cellar in the early hours of that morning but had not been discovered until later. Miss Chandler was positive she had not seen it in the morning papers. The waitress looked over her shoulder as she finished serving the table behind.

"Only another old fire," she said. "It was all over by midday. Look! Did you see the picture on the back page? New British film star! Never heard of her, have you? Wonder how much she paid to get that in. Don't think much of her expression. No personality, if you know what I mean. Any pastries?"

Miss Chandler refused pastries and restored the paper to its owner. She gathered up her parcels and went, leaving the handsome tip of six shillings under the edge of her plate.

When she got back to the flat, she found Mr. Hughes in Nanny's bedroom reading aloud to the old lady. He finished his sentence, then closed the book and got up.

"I hope you enjoyed your outing," he said politely.

"Oh, yes, thank you. Very much indeed. Did you find it a nuisance getting tea?" She looked round the room. "Surely you didn't clear away?"

"Everything is exactly as you left it," said Mr. Hughes gravely.

"Washed up? Oh, you shouldn't have done that. Look, I can always do it when I get back, really I can."

"It was no trouble," Mr. Hughes assured her. "Now I must get along."

He took leave of Miss Chandler at the door of the flat.

"I hope your patient has not suffered from my efforts."

"Of course not. And thank you for sending me out with a clear conscience. I didn't expect to go out at all when I heard Miss Lucas couldn't come."

Again he gave her a warm friendly smile. Miss Chandler listened

to his footsteps die away on the stairs before she went in and shut the door of the flat.

**L**ater that evening Hughes sat in Mr. Merriman's comfortable study, peacefully smoking one of his excellent cigars. They were not alone; Fred Purvis was there to supplement his partner's statements and also young Kain, his natural impudence a little dashed by such exalted surroundings.

Mr. Merriman sat forward to tip the ash off his cigar.

"It seems pretty conclusive," he said. "Kain was told the next fire would be somewhere in the Tottenham Court Road area, and this morning a shop in that area goes up in flames. The stock and furniture were insured with us about eight months ago. Late this afternoon a letter is handed in to us by special messenger, from Mr. Godfrey Standish, claiming the full value of all the goods insured. The fire was not mentioned in the morning papers. It first appeared in the third edition of the afternoon ones. But by that time our Mr. Standish had not only heard of it, but had taken full particulars and presumably had been on the spot soon after the fire occurred. Of course, there's nothing intrinsically wrong in Standish's hurrying to fires: it's his job to assess claims. But if he keeps this sort of intelligence service going, it must cost money, and I don't see that his ten percent commission on the successful claims would pay for it. Therefore, there must be something in what Kain's boastful acquaintances are saying. Some of the Standish fires are deliberately manufactured. The point is, how can we prove it? Ought we to get the police?"

"Not yet." Hughes was decided. "This Standish is a cunning bird. He'll lay off directly he thinks we're on the watch. No, let Kain go on chumming up with Cope and his friends. Try to find out if there's any connection between the Boss and the proprietors of the premises that burn. Couldn't you send him down to this latest one tomorrow as assistant to your man?"

"That's an idea."

"Get a good look at the claimant, Kain, and see if you can hear of anyone in the gang who corresponds to him. And keep your ears open for news of fresh fires about to take place. Sooner or later, Cope is going to be hauled over the coals by this boss of his for talking too freely. Really, you want to make yourself useful to the gang before that happens. I take it Cope's job is to keep an eye on my activities."

Kain nodded.

"That's right. Cope seems to think he won't get anything out of you directly. He thinks you have agents. He was telling me the other day that you interviewed a suspicious-looking woman at the office a month ago."

"Suspicious-looking! — Good God, he means Miss Chandler." Mr. Hughes lay back in his chair helpless with laughter.

When Merriman had been told the true nature of Miss Chandler's connection with the firm of Hughes and Purvis, he became very much excited.

"You mean to tell me you spent an afternoon shut up at this flat while Miss Chandler was out, and that the gang thinks she is a paid spy?"

"That's about it."

"So that they are concentrating on her while you have a perfectly good alibi whenever you choose to take advantage of it?"

"Yes, if you like to put it that way."

Merriman leaned forward impressively.

"It's a gift," he said. "Kain encourages them in their belief that Miss Chandler is your agent, and therefore indirectly ours. They follow her innocent movements and are duly mystified. You arrange her off-days when Kain gives notice of some new scheme. When she's gone and the coast is clear, you can shoot off on your own and make your investigations at the actual time the fire is going on."

"It's a scheme," said Mr. Hughes admiringly, but he shook his head. "I couldn't leave the flat, though. The old lady is quite helpless."

"Tell you what," answered Merriman, "you can have Thompson to hold the fort for you. He is the most discreet and courteous butler I have ever had. He will simply sit in the flat until you get back. Miss Chandler won't know you've been out, nor will the gang as long as we keep their attention fixed on Miss Chandler."

"I'll manage that," said Kain.

Mr. Hughes frowned.

"I suppose there is no risk to her," he said doubtfully. He was surprised at his own solicitude, but damn it, she was such a helpless poor creature except at her job. No incompetence there, he decided, remembering her skillful movements about the sick bed and Nanny's grateful, admiring eyes.

Mr. Merriman raised his eyebrows. Hughes taking an interest in a woman's welfare! Life was full of surprises.

Miss Chandler stood before the table in the little kitchen of the flat, arranging the things on the teatray. Sugar basin to the left, milk jug in the center, teapot on the right, cup and plate in front. Smiling, she put a small vase of flowers in the corner next to the teapot and stood back to look at the effect. She moved the tea caddy close up to the tray near the invalid's feeding cup. Then she straightened her hat, took up her bag and gloves, and went out towards the front door. She put her head inside the sitting room door to tell Mr. Hughes she was going. He did not come out, but he called a cheerful goodbye. Rather disappointed, she opened the front door and went down the stairs. She passed a man going up but did not pay much attention to him until as she crossed the hall she heard the front door of the flat open and Mr. Hughes's voice say, "You're early, Thompson, but never mind." Somehow she had never expected Mr. Hughes to have visitors while he was on duty, but obviously it was none of her business.

Inside the flat Hughes led the butler into the sitting room, explained his duties, which were to answer the door if anyone called, which was unlikely, and to look into the invalid's room once or twice in the middle of the afternoon and give her a drink of milk if she was awake.

After Mr. Hughes had gone himself, Thompson settled down for his vigil. He took off his coat, arranged the cushions on the sofa to his liking, and himself upon the cushions, spread newspapers over his prostrate form with one sheet over his face, and went peacefully to sleep.

At the same hour as before Miss Chandler made her way to the same Lyons restaurant as before, and to the same table in it. The kind waitress was in attendance, and at once recognized her. They greeted one another warmly.

"You're quite a stranger."

"My employer never quite knows when he can let me out. He does my work for me on my off-days."

"You don't say."

"You must tell me your name," said Miss Chandler. "I expect I shall come here a good deal when I do get the chance."

"Rose," answered the girl. "My father likes old fashioned things,

and he doesn't hold with these film star names. I'd of liked Loretta myself."

"Oh, no," said Miss Chandler. "Rose is much nicer."

A man came in and settled himself at a table nearby. He was the same man who had talked to Cope on the day that young Kain had just made contact with the gang. He opened his newspaper and stood it up between himself and Miss Chandler as a screen, from behind which he could watch her without being noticed.

While she sipped her tea and nibbled her crumpets, gazing dreamily at the crowd before her, she suddenly became aware of bells clanging in the street, at first distant and mixed with the music of the orchestra, then as the band ceased playing loud and insistent, causing all heads to turn to the window. It was a fire engine passing in the street outside.

As the noise died away in the distance Rose brought the evening paper to Miss Chandler's table and gave it to her while she made out her bill.

"It's this fire Covent Garden way," she explained. "They've been at it all the afternoon."

"How funny. I remember there was a fire in the paper the first time I came here."

"Was there? There's always fires."

Another engine clanged in the distance, came nearer, passed. Miss Chandler put on her gloves and took her bill to the pay desk. The man who was watching her called for his own.

In the crowds round the door Miss Chandler was slowly borne to the revolving exit. She passed through but immediately came in again on the other side and squeezed apologetically behind a fat man who was standing just inside the entrance. The watcher, having noted her departure, turned to pay his bill and hurried through the exit. He did not, therefore, notice her return, and stood outside gazing about him, completely at a loss.

Miss Chandler went back to the sweet stall.

"I nearly forgot Nanny's sweets," she told the girl behind the counter. "Half a pound of peppermint creams, please. What a crush it is getting in and out of the door."

"The side door isn't so bad," said the girl, pointing in its direction. She handed over the parcel. Miss Chandler looked round at the side door, nodded, and thanked her.

Outside the main door the baffled watcher gave it up and jumped onto a passing bus.

\* \* \*

When Miss Chandler reached the flat on her return, it was opened for her, as usual, by Mr. Hughes. She thanked him, told him not to wait, and went on into Nanny's room. The old woman seemed agitated but for no apparent cause, so Miss Chandler rearranged her pillows and said cheerfully, "You'll be wanting your supper," whereupon the patient became noticeably calmer. Miss Chandler went into the kitchen, taking off her hat as she did so.

On the kitchen table stood the tray, every one of its contents in exactly the same position as she had left it. The little vase of flowers was in the corner near the teapot. For some minutes Miss Chandler stared, hardly believing her own eyes. Then she snatched up the teapot, took off its lid, looked inside, smelt it, and turning to the sink picked up the empty sink basket and stared from it to the teapot in her hand.

She was roused by Mr. Hughes's voice behind her shoulder.

"All washed up as usual. What are you staring at?"

She faced him slowly.

"You have put everything back just as I left it. It—it surprised me."

He frowned swiftly, and smiled with an effort.

"Have I been over-conscious?"

"Oh, no. Of course not."

"Well, I must get along. I may not be able to come down again for a week or two. I'm very busy just now. But I'll ring you. Don't come to the door."

Forgetting her usual polite insistence, she obeyed him, standing by the table listening until the front door shut. When she knew that he had gone, she went back into the sitting room. On the floor lay several sheets of newspaper. She picked them up and saw again the account of the fire in Covent Garden. Putting down the paper, she went into the bedroom.

"I'm just getting your supper," she said. "Are you very hungry? You look as if you'd missed your tea."

But the old woman only smiled her usual jerky smile and shook her head.

Kain stood before Mr. Merriman's table at the offices of Salvo's. The director was looking pleased.

"You're doing very well, Kain."

"Thank you, sir. It was really that lot of information you let me

give them. It's given them confidence in me. I'll be allowed to meet the Boss soon, I am hoping."

"Good. They seem to have taken our bait, all right."

"Yes, sir. They definitely suspect Miss Chandler of spying. They sent a man after her last time. He got into a serious row because he lost sight of her in a crowd. He's begged for a second chance to show what he can do. He'll stick to her like a leech next time."

"It won't matter if he does. She will just go her innocent way."

**M**r. Hughes arrived on her next afternoon off. Miss Chandler set the tray as usual and filled the kettle, putting it on the stove. Then very deliberately she opened one of the cupboards, took the tea caddy and hid it in the darkest corner, looking fearfully about her as she did so. As she was closing the cupboard door the front doorbell rang. She jumped guiltily and shutting but not locking the cupboard, ran down the passage to let in Mr. Hughes. She gave him the briefest of greetings, squeezed past him, and hurried off, leaving him staring. She did not look back as she turned out of the gate, with its "To Let" sign for the bottom flat. The watcher came off the railings and followed.

Rose brought the evening paper folded neatly in a corner of her tray. Miss Chandler opened it and ran her eyes over the front page.

"Floods," said Rose, pointing to a depressing picture of a man wading up a road. "It was fires the last twice, wasn't it? If it isn't one thing, it's another."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," answered Miss Chandler with a little sigh. The man at the next table but one poured himself out a second cup of tea.

Outside in Trafalgar Square the illuminated signs flashed and glowed. The ribbon news moved slowly past; "Warehouse—is—still—smouldering—Firemen—are—still—pumping—water—on—ruins—Floods—in—Thames—valley—"

A small paragraph on an inner page of her newspaper caught Miss Chandler's eye. A warehouse at Aldgate had been found burning about midnight. The fire had been got under control in the early hours of the morning, but later had burst out again. When Rose passed her table a second time, Miss Chandler pointed to the paragraph, laughing. Rose laughed, too.

This time the watcher did not fail. He followed closely behind Miss Chandler as she bought her sweets, paid her bill, and left the restaurant. He followed her down to the corner of the road, where

she stood staring out across the square. The lighted news ticked slowly past in mid-air. "Fire—at—Aldgate—warehouse—is—still—smouldering—Firemen—are—pumping—water—on—ruins—Floods—"

Miss Chandler turned abruptly and dashed back to the bus stop. "Aldgate?" she cried to the bus conductor as a Number 6 drove up.

"Other side," the man shouted, "going the other way. Over by the church."

Miss Chandler, looking in the wrong direction and risking death in the crowded one-way street, made a dart across the road. Her shadow, held up by a taxi, missed the bus onto which she climbed and had to content himself with catching the next. Miss Chandler swayed into an empty front seat and sat down.

By the light of their powerful lamps, the Fire Brigade continued their work that had begun some fourteen hours previously. Clouds of smoke and steam rose from the partly gutted building before them, while the great hoses poured a steady stream into it and the gutters flowed with the returning water. A sordid street at the best of times, made up of old fashioned decaying shops and warehouses, it now looked ten times worse, and Mr. Hughes, standing close up to the police cordon that was keeping the crowd in check, decided it was a pity the Fire Brigade was so efficient. If the whole row of ramshackle buildings had been demolished, London would have profited by their disappearance. But he could not allow these unbusinesslike feelings to interfere with his plans. So he kept on the pavement close to the wall and waited patiently with his oldest country cap pulled well down over one eye until the work slackened and the firemen began to draw off, leaving a reduced team on guard, while the police allowed the people to circulate once more, though the street was still closed to motor traffic. Under cover of the crowd that jostled slowly past, encouraged by the police to "move on and keep moving," Hughes stepped into the doorway of the empty building next to the ruin and, making his way up to the roof, climbed out through a skylight and clambered onto the roof of the damaged warehouse and down into the interior. The air was acid with smoke, making his eyes water, and started him coughing violently. Pocket torch in hand, he came out upon a staircase that was nearly all burnt away and nearly fell, sending a beam crashing down to the bottom of the empty shaft. He felt his way back and

found another staircase in the unburnt part of the building down which he went carefully until he arrived on the ground floor. Here he found what he was looking for, stacked bales of fabric, for which already that morning Mr. Godfrey Standish had sent in a claim to the Salvo Insurance Company.

Hughes inspected the bales closely. They were rolls of cretonne wrapped round with canvas and tied with rope. To his utter surprise, he found that nearly all the bales had been charred or otherwise damaged by fire.

He looked about him. This part of the building had escaped entirely. No flames had come this way. Yet here was definite evidence of damage by fire. Had they been moved or had they—

He stooped and with his pocket knife ripped out the label on one of the bales together with a piece of the burnt sacking covering it. Stuffing his prize into his pocket, he hurried back by the way he had come.

When Miss Chandler arrived on the scene the firemen were preparing to leave. She stood rather forlornly watching. She seemed to have missed the excitement, and the pavement was very wet, the road worse. As she turned to go, a man passed her and was joined by another man. Both their faces were familiar. One she recognized as Mr. Hughes's clerk Cope, but the other she could not place. Before she had fully recovered from her surprise, Mr. Hughes himself, strangely dressed in a cap and muffler, walked quickly past her. She gave a little gasp of astonishment and stepped back into a policeman.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she cried apologetically.

Cope and the shadow, who had been joined by a tall thin man with a cruel face, saw her move. They were some distance away and did not hear what she said.

"Now will you believe your own eyes?" Cope whispered. The thin man nodded.

"Looks like it. She's got something to say to the busy. Fade out, chaps. See you later."

They melted away, and when Miss Chandler looked again for Cope, he was no longer there. His place was occupied by an untidy, greasy individual who was lamenting to one of the firemen about the loss of his stock. Miss Chandler looked across at the building. A metal plate still hung sideways above one of the doors. On it she could read G. E. TUKES & CO.

\* \* \*

She arrived at the flat in fear and trembling. If Mr. Hughes had deserted his post, how had her poor patient fared through the long afternoon?

But he opened the door to her as usual, and as usual his collar and tie were irreproachable and his bowler hat lay in its place in the hall. She hurried into the kitchen. The tray, the feeding cup, all was as she had left it, but the tea caddy that she had hidden also stood beside the tray and in the sink basket there were tea leaves.

She went into Nanny's room where she found Mr. Hughes at his old nurse's bedside.

"Everything okay in the kitchen?" he asked with a sardonic smile.

"Yes," faltered Miss Chandler.

"You forgot to put out the tea caddy. I had a devil of a job finding it."

His eyes, full of the laughter that was on his lips, held her unwilling gaze. She was helpless before his mockery.

The offices of Mr. Godfrey Standish lay through a narrow doorway wedged between two shop fronts. The staircase that led straight up from a dirty mat just inside the door was also narrow and uncarpeted.

Cope's feet clattered on it as he led Kain upwards. The first landing doors were bare except for one that had "Private" on a small dirty-white enamel plate. Cope went on up the second flight and stopped outside a door marked "Enquiries. Knock and Enter."

The room, when they had obeyed these instructions, was found to be empty of occupants. A typewriter stood on a rough wooden table on which a good many papers lay in apparent confusion. Except for the table and the chair beside it, there was no furniture. A small old fashioned gas fire flickered uncertainly on the hearth. The whole room was both dirty and dusty.

Kain had only just completed a swift survey of his surroundings when a tall, thin man came in and, saying curtly, "The Boss is waiting," turned on his heel and went out. They followed him across the landing into a larger room labeled "Godfrey Standish. Agent. Private."

The prevailing dirtiness was extended to this room also, which, though larger than the other, gave the same appearance of neglect.

Kain decided that in spite of the files and typewriters and the telephone on the desk, the office was not intended for the reception of clients so much as for the planning of business coups.

Standish was sitting behind one of the tables talking to the thin man, whom he called Paul. Cope introduced Kain. Standish looked at him closely, but in silence, and then motioned to Paul to provide seats for the newcomers. As the latter was bringing in the solitary chair from the other room, two more men arrived and stood to attention against the wall. They were followed by others until ten in all had collected including Cope and Kain, Paul and Standish. One of them was the man who had followed Miss Chandler, and another was the stout Mr. G. E. Tukes who had just lost the greater part of his warehouse.

Without a word the men filed up to Mr. Standish's table and were each presented with a pay envelope. Some broke theirs open and pocketed the contents; others stuffed the envelope away whole. Mr. Paul, at Standish's elbow, ticked off numbers on a list he held. The men went away as silently as they came, not all together, but in ones or twos at intervals. At last, besides Cope and Kain, only Tukes and Paul were left. Standish reached in a drawer for a box of cigars and handed them round.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Kain," he said affably.

Cope sat forward nervously on the edge of his chair.

"Mr. Hughes sent that woman out again today. Fielder didn't lose her this time—followed her right down. She was there when we left, talking to a busy. Kain here says Salvo's have put a special man onto all your work. He'll be down there first thing tomorrow."

Standish nodded approvingly. He turned to Tukes.

"What about it?"

"Some of the stuff went up in the blaze. I'll move the rest out tonight."

"Can you? They'll be keeping an eye on the warehouse after that second outbreak."

"The building next door is empty and has a back entrance off an alley. I'll manage. We'll have to repack the cretonne after this, all that's left of it."

"Why not get the girls to make it up into cushion covers? Bring it forward again as fancy goods."

They all laughed except Tukes, who shook his head solemnly.

"Not suitable," he said. "But we might consider bedspreads."

Standish suddenly became serious.

"Who is this woman of Hughes's?"

Cope leaned forward.

"She was engaged answering an advertisement for a nurse-companion. That may have been a code, of course. Perhaps Hughes has had her work for him before. She lives in the first floor flat of a converted house. Top floor, an elderly woman with a daughter in business, bottom floor been empty the last few weeks. The last three times we've had a job on in London, Hughes has gone down there in the afternoon and this woman has been in the offing. She waits till dark to do her stuff, and she's as slippery as an eel."

"But this last time Fielder managed to stick tight, and warned you in time. That's not quite good enough. Paul, you'd better move into that empty ground floor flat. Your wife will chum up with—Miss Chandler, isn't it? She will find out what she pretends to be doing, and you will both arrange to accompany her on her next expedition. Meanwhile, Fielder will stay in your ground floor flat and watch for Hughes, taking note of anyone who comes to visit him or any activity on the part of our enterprising solicitor."

He grinned unpleasantly. Kain felt that his own position would not be very enjoyable could Mr. Standish see into his mind. Paul shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll go and see the house agents right away," he said.

**M**iss Chandler was reading the newspaper to Nanny when there was a discreet knock at the door and a broad red face appeared round the corner of it.

"Excuse me, miss, but where does your main turn off?"

"Oh dear, I don't know," said Miss Chandler, getting up hurriedly. She went out to the kitchen and gazed helplessly at the pipes that ran along the walls and twined together under the sink. The plumber had deposited his bag of tools and blow lamp on the kitchen table and was bent in half trying to sort out the water supply.

"It's these converted houses," said Miss Chandler. "I shouldn't wonder if the water turns off downstairs in the former kitchen of the house."

"I thought o' that," returned the plumber, straightening up and scratching his head. "I bin down and arst the lady. She got a separate supply, see. So you ought to have the same."

"What would it look like?"

"Might be a ordinary straight tap, or one o' them round-'andled screw-down sort, see."

"Oh, I know what you mean," said Miss Chandler, brightening.  
"It's in the bathroom."

She led the way there and displayed proudly the incoming main rising through the floor with stop-cock attached.

"That's 'er," said the plumber. " 'Ot tap, I think you said, miss?"

"Yes, please. The hot tap in the kitchen. I think it's only the washer, but you'd better see what you find."

"Okay, miss."

Margery Chandler left him to it and returned to her charge. Almost at once the bell rang. When she opened it, she found a tall woman in an elegant overall on the doorstep.

"I'm so sorry to disturb you, but I wonder if you would mind asking your plumber to look in downstairs again before he goes. I've got a leak I want him to see to. I'm Mrs. Paul, your new neighbor."

"How do you do? Of course I'll tell him."

"Thanks ever so. It's so good of you. If your telephone is out of order any time, don't hesitate to come and borrow ours, will you?"

Mr. Hughes and Fred Purvis were working late. The outer office was deserted and dark, its typewriters covered and its desks and tables cleared and tidy. But in Mr. Hughes's room confusion reigned. His table, the chairs, and even the floor were covered with stacks of files and papers. The two partners in shirtsleeves, with tousled hair, read and searched and read again. Suddenly Mr. Hughes slapped his hand down on his desk.

"It works," he cried triumphantly.

"Which does?"

"The cretonne. The flowered cretonne that was not burnt in the fire at G. E. Tukes's warehouse in spite of the fact that it was covered with scorched wrappings and a partly burnt label, Exhibit One."

Hughes unlocked a drawer and took out the label he had detached at the warehouse.

"Listen," he said. "This cretonne started life in the cotton mills of Lancashire. It went to a wholesale firm who sold it to Mr. G. E. Tukes, who calls himself a general dealer. Mr. Tukes sold it to a small draper in Worcester. This shop was burnt down two years ago. The salvaged goods, including our cretonne, were bought by

Mr. Tukes, general dealer. The shop got compensation from an insurance company. The cretonne, diminished in bulk but insured again as new material, next appears in a fire at Yarmouth ten months ago. Again it was paid on by the insurance companies, and again it was taken over by Mr. Tukes. Its last public appearance to date was in the recent fire on Mr. Tukes's own premises. It was, as I have told you, unscathed on that occasion. Nevertheless, it is reported in the claim to Salvo's as 'hopelessly damaged' and is put down at full value for new stock."

"Wonderful," said Fred Purvis. "For sheer bare-faced cheek, the thing is magnificent."

"That's only one example," answered Hughes. "But it's the clearest and most complete. You know, Fred, I think I'll take it along to Merriman. He's got a better safe in his house than I have here."

He fixed the warehouse documents together with a clip and added the burnt label and the price of packing. As he did so Fred Purvis came away from the window.

"The two men who have been showing so much interest in this block are still holding one another up on the other side of the road," he said.

"Can't help their trouble," replied Mr. Hughes. "Help me clear up this mess, Fred."

A little later the two men emerged into the street. Mr. Hughes was carrying a small black leather case, securely tucked under one arm. As he and Fred turned into High Holborn, several men came along the footpath with arms linked, laughing and singing. They bore down on the partners, jostled into them without unlinking, pushed past and away again. Mr. Hughes gave an audible cry and began looking about on the ground. One of the men looked back, and the whole party hurried away at a fast walk. Mr. Hughes seized Fred's arm and boarded a passing taxi.

"As I thought," he said, mopping his forehead. "They got the case. Much good may it do them."

"What was in it?" asked Fred, grinning.

"My morning copy of the *Times*," replied Mr. Hughes, unbuttoning his coat to show Fred the precious documents safe in the inner pocket.

Mr. Merriman shut the door of his private safe on the papers and walked restlessly up and down.

"That's a brilliant bit of work, Hughes," he said, "but it stops

short at Standish. It won't do us a pennyworth of good unless we can get the final connection. If we take a case against Tukes, we shall probably be successful in eliminating him for the time being. But Standish is left in as boss and the main organization goes on."

"Still, we know we are on the right lines," said Purvis. "Sooner or later we shall link up to Standish. I think we just have to carry on, and take our opportunities as we find them."

"I've one bit of news for you," Merriman said, stopping his restless pacing and coming back to the other two. "Kain reports that the two members of the gang who are now in the flat below Miss Chandler are thoroughly disappointed so far. They were surprised to find a bona fide invalid upstairs, and they say Miss Chandler is perfectly friendly but as slippery as an eel. The Boss has come to the conclusion that either Miss Chandler is very, very wily indeed or that Cope is completely wrong about her. Cope is a little out of favor in consequence, which makes things more difficult for Kain. I shall have to think up another present for him to give Mr. Standish."

The three men laughed, but Hughes shook his head.

"I don't like those people coming to the downstairs flat, and still less the way they are cultivating Margery Chandler. She keeps her eyes open, that girl. She suspects something going on behind her back the days I take over for her. Thompson let me down over the tea things. He didn't use them. If she gets too friendly with this Mrs. Paul, she may begin confiding her suspicions to her."

Purvis glanced up.

"You'll have to use a different technique now the Pauls are there."

Hughes nodded.

"I know. I've got it all taped. I'm going down soon, fires or no fires, to try it out."

**M**iss Chandler filled the kettle at the kitchen tap and put it back on the gas stove. The teatray stood ready in its accustomed place on the table. She went next into the bathroom and, stooping, turned the tap the plumber had used to stop the water's coming through the main. This done she began to put on her hat, first rather tremulously trying a little makeup on her face. The result was quite astonishingly successful.

Mr. Hughes, when the door was opened to him, thought the same.

His superior, rather pitying attitude to Miss Chandler suffered a shock. He became unaccountably shy.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," he said humbly.

"No, of course not. You never do."

Miss Chandler was warmed by his gentle speech: she began to suffer from remorse at the thought of the trap she had laid for him. They looked into one another's eyes, and Margery Chandler turned away her head.

"I must go," she said in a low voice. "Mr. and Mrs. Paul are taking me to the pictures."

"Indeed." In his sharp interest at this move Mr. Hughes spoke more emphatically than he intended. Miss Chandler flushed.

"Why shouldn't I?" she said indignantly.

Mr. Hughes realized the hopelessness of trying to explain himself. He shrugged his shoulders and turned deliberately and rudely away.

"I simply don't understand you," cried Margery, bold in her exasperation. She slammed the front door behind her, and Mr. Hughes heard her running downstairs.

He darted into the front room and waited by the window. Almost at once he saw a trio emerge from the front door and walk out into the street. Miss Chandler was in the middle with the two Pauls one on either side. Almost immediately after they had disappeared Thompson walked in at the gate. Mr. Hughes welcomed him at the door of the flat.

"Miss Chandler has gone out with friends," said Hughes gravely. "The new tenants, in fact. We seem to be left in possession as usual."

Thompson sniffed.

"There's a person in a Homburg hat sitting behind the curtains downstairs, sir. The hat is a good deal the worse for wear, if I may say so."

"Then we will have our little practice as planned," said Mr. Hughes.

He went into the kitchen, smiled at the preparations for tea, and shook some tea leaves out of the teacaddy into the sink. He had his hand on the tap when Thompson came in with Mr. Hughes's attaché case.

"Is this the one, sir?"

"Yes. You might be getting it out, Thompson."

"Very good, sir." While the butler opened the case and took out

the rope ladder that was coiled up inside it, Mr. Hughes caught up the kettle and emptied it over the tea leaves in the sink basket. This done, he put the empty kettle back in its place.

"You know, life would be simpler, Thompson, if you drank tea like a normal British subject."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I couldn't bring myself to do it."

Mr. Hughes put on his cap and muffler and hung the rope ladder out the kitchen window where it lay in the angle between two walls. Then he drew it up again. The two men put their heads out the window, considering their plan of action.

"I can't be seen from the front of the house," explained Mr. Hughes, "and I need not go round that way. If I get through the hedge down there, I'm in a narrow lane that separates this garden from the next. It is an old right of way, I expect. It must lead somewhere. I shall follow it away from the road. The only snag is the window below. I think it might be a good plan if you were to rivet the attention of the gentleman in the Homburg hat by walking down to the gate, looking out, counting twenty, and walking back. This is my spare key to the flat so that you can let yourself in again. Be on the watch for me in an hour's time."

"Yes, sir."

When Mr. Hughes had dropped the rope ladder once more and had his leg over the sill, Thompson went down to the front gate as planned. Mr. Hughes swayed his way down the ladder. By the time Thompson got back to the kitchen window and the watcher in the flat below had relaxed again, the solicitor had disappeared. Thompson wound up the ladder, and with a face of faint disgust took up the feeding cup to prepare Nanny a drink of milk.

Miss Chandler, escorted by the Pauls, moved up the steps of the local cinema, a gaudy modern suburban building. They crossed the magnificent lounge and were shown into three seats in the middle of a row. On the screen two lovers were locked in their final embrace. The feature ended, and the newsreel came on. After the usual opening ceremony with a closeup of several politicians, a football match, and a boat wrecked on a rocky shore, there was a picture of a fire in Leeds at a small general store. This comparatively obscure establishment had found a place in the news chiefly because it was next door to a veterinary surgeon's animal hospital, the patients from which were evacuated by the staff and willing helpers from among the police and watching crowds. Mild laughter

greeted the facetious remarks of the commentator, but Miss Chandler took no part in this, for she had received a severe shock. A closeup of the owner of the warehouse in conversation with the veterinary surgeon was exhibited. The fat, greasy little man was unmistakable—none other than Mr. Tukes of Aldgate.

In her surprise and bewilderment Miss Chandler exclaimed aloud. She was immediately aware of a stiffening in the seats on either side of her. Looking from one to the other she saw the Pauls exchange significant glances.

Mr. Hughes, from behind the hedge, threw up a pebble, which struck the kitchen window of the flat. It was opened at once by Thompson and the rope ladder was lowered. Mr. Hughes climbed up rapidly and the rope ladder was withdrawn, but not a moment too soon. For the watcher in the flat below, bored with his long vigil, had begun to prowl about, and as he walked into the kitchen he heard the click of the rope ladder as it scraped over the sill above. He darted to the window, thrust it up, and looked out, just too late to see the upper window softly closed. He was back in the sitting room, however, in time to see Thompson walk out into the road.

Miss Chandler let herself into the flat with her own key and closed the door very gently behind her. Mr. Hughes's bowler hat and overcoat were lying on the chair in the passage. She stood still and listened. From Nanny's room came the sound of his voice, continuous, rising and falling. He was evidently reading aloud to the old woman.

She began to feel in the pockets of his overcoat. First she found the cap and recognized it as the one he had worn at the Aldgate fire. In another pocket she found a revolver. That startled her, so that she left the overcoat and crept on tiptoe past Nanny's room to the kitchen. The electric light switch clicked loudly as she moved it, but the reading voice continued smoothly without interruption. Miss Chandler inspected the tray, the kettle, and the sink basket. Then she put out a trembling hand and turned on the tap. No water fell from it. As she stared at this confirmation of her fears a shadow moved across the sink. She turned with a gasp. Mr. Hughes stood close to her, smiling affably.

"I like to leave everything as I find it," he said.

Before Miss Chandler could reply, he strode out of the room with

a movement astonishingly swift for a man of his size. The next moment, with a cough and a splutter, the water rushed from the tap, drenching Miss Chandler, who leaped away in alarm and indignation. Mr. Hughes returned as swiftly as he went, and turned off the tap.

"I thought you wanted to use the water," he explained innocently.

"You didn't! You did it on purpose!" Miss Chandler was breathless, terrified, but not defeated. "And you didn't know I'd turned it off, which I did on purpose. On purpose, I tell you. Because I know now what you do on my afternoons out—leaving poor Nanny all alone in the flat for anything to happen."

"I do not leave her alone."

"You do. You pretend to have tea and clean it up, but you never have tea at all. It's a lie if you say you do."

"No, I have not had tea here for some time."

"I knew it! You go out as soon as my back's turned. I know you do. I saw you in the cap you have out there in the hall, at that fire in Aldgate. And you know I was there—I can see it in your face."

"Yes, I know you were there. But I did not see you there."

"I don't know what you're doing, but it's always fires—every time I go out. Even today, at the cinema—that fire in Leeds, with the same man who owned the place at Aldgate."

"What?"

Mr. Hughes stepped up to her and in his excitement seized her arm.

"You know it yourself! You must know! Tukes. G. E. Tukes. I saw it on a board at Aldgate. That's his name. Why are his houses burning? What are you doing? Why are you doing it?" She checked herself and said more quietly, "I shall go to the police."

Mr. Hughes looked at her with admiration.

"Oh, I don't think that would be wise—not just at present," he said quietly. "But I think you will have to go from here."

Miss Chandler faced him squarely.

"Are you giving me notice? Because I tell you I won't leave Nanny in the lurch. You know it won't be easy to find anyone to take my place. But I'm not going till you do. You may not care what happens to her. You only put her here so that you could sneak off on the quiet and nobody know about it. I won't desert her whatever you do to me."

"My dearest girl," said Mr. Hughes surprisingly. "I shall not leave Nanny in the lurch, nor you either."

With that he left the room and the flat. Margery Chandler crumpled up on a kitchen chair and burst into tears.

**S**tandish, Tukes, and Paul sat round the table of the dirty office in High Holborn. Paul was gloomy, Tukes ill at ease. Standish eyed them both sardonically.

"You are a bright lot, the pair of you," he snapped at them. "George poses for a closeup and Henry takes the little spy to see his picture. Just after I told you, George, to be careful at Leeds. You knew that cretonne had been tampered with before."

"It was that bloody little vet," grumbled Mr. Tukes. "He got talking and I didn't notice the cameras till it was too late. I tried to turn my back."

"Exposing your unmistakable profile," snarled Standish. "You are all kinds of a fool, George."

"Well, you can't pick on me," said Paul slowly. "I couldn't know what would be in the newsreel."

"You might have guessed."

Paul did not bother to answer; he spat into the grate instead.

"I propose," said Mr. Standish, choosing his words carefully, "to liquidate this concern, and have a rest for an indefinite period, incognito."

"Where do we come in?" Tukes asked gently.

"I thought," replied Standish, not answering him directly, "that we might have one final combustion. I have a very pretty little plan. I'll tell you about it. The proceeds should set us up for two years at least. Then if we want to start again, I think with me to organize the outfit we quite safely might."

"What about the others?" asked Paul. "Some of them have seen you—and been up here, too."

"When I am no longer here that has no significance." Standish frowned. "But Cope now. He is too close to that damned solicitor. I think," said the Boss very quietly, "that Cope knows too much."

Paul spat again.

"Okay," he said.

"What about the young man from Salvo's—Kain?" asked Mr. Tukes.

The Boss considered.

"He's been up here once, but we've never given him a job to do, as we have Cope. Perhaps he wouldn't have bungled it as Cope did those papers. We've only listened to Kain's news. He wouldn't dare

speak for fear of being shown up. We can leave him out—or postpone him, anyway. Look more natural one at a time."

"Okay," said Paul again.

Miss Gregory took the cover off her typewriter and arranged her work about her. She glanced up at the office clock, which said ten A.M., and across to Cope's empty table. The other two clerks were busy at work.

Before she could start her letters the bell rang for her. She went into Mr. Hughes's room.

"Cope turned up yet, Miss Gregory?"

"No, Mr. Hughes."

"Right. Ask Mr. Purvis if he would kindly come across, please."

"Yes, Mr. Hughes."

Fred Purvis came at once. Hughes looked up at him.

"Cope hasn't arrived yet. I don't like it."

"Have you spoken to Merriman?"

"No."

"It might be as well to know if young Kain has turned up."

Hughes nodded and got through to Salvo's. The answer was satisfactory; the young man was in his place.

"Get Kain to make contact with the gang at lunchtime if possible and see if he can hear anything."

Hughes did not know that at about the same time the River Police, patrolling off Tower Bridge, directed their launch to a dark shape in the water and found it to be the dead body of an unknown man.

Miss Chandler, after a night of agitation and anxiety, decided to get in touch with her sister, implore her to come over, and discuss the whole situation with her. Consequently, when she had let in Mrs. Durley, the charwoman, and had finished with her own and Nanny's breakfasts, she took up the telephone to ask for her sister's number. There was no reply from the exchange, no buzzing, nothing at all. She tried for several minutes, then with a sinking heart put back the receiver. Mr. Hughes had cut off the telephone.

Slowly and with mounting fear she wrote a short note, found a stamp, and ran out to take her written appeal to the post.

But again she was frustrated. As she reached the bottom of the stairs the front door of the ground floor flat opened and Mrs. Paul came out dressed for the street, with a shopping bag on her arm.

She saw the letter in Miss Chandler's hand and stretched out her own for it.

"I can post that for you," she said gaily. "I'm just off to the shops."

"Oh, no. I want to take it. I—I want the air."

"You aren't ill, are you?" asked Mrs. Paul, staring at her. "You don't look up to much. I'd go and have a lie down if I were you. I'll post your letter. It's no trouble, really."

She was blocking the way, and Margery Chandler saw that resistance was hopeless without the open breach she dared not risk. She gave up her letter with a little moan of distress and stumbled back upstairs, pushing the front door open nearly into Mrs. Durley's face. The charwoman knelt upright in great indignation.

"Mind 'oo you shovin'," she said angrily.

Miss Chandler looked at the vindictive expression on Mrs. Durley's broad face, and a fresh fear twitched her mind. Was Mrs. Durley also part of this conspiracy, this net that was beginning to close about her in punishment for her curiosity? The charwoman, seeing the stark terror in Miss Chandler's eyes, lumbered to her feet and took her by the arm, her face melting into its accustomed genial smile.

"Lor-love-a-duck! Whatever's bin upsettin' you?" she exclaimed. "Let me get you a nice 'ot cup o' tea."

At lunchtime Kain went to the pub where he was accustomed to meet Cope. The clerk was not there, but Fielder and another man were drinking at the bar. Kain joined them and ordered half a pint of draught beer and a sandwich. The others took no apparent notice of him. When he had been served, he raised his mug to the man next to him.

"Here's how!" he said pleasantly. The man muttered a reply but was turning away again when Kain touched his arm.

"Has Cope been in?" he asked.

"Who?" he said.

"Cope."

"Don't know him." Very deliberately he turned his back on the young man.

But Kain was not to be put off so easily. He laughed, as if in appreciation of a good joke, and said cheerfully, "That's a good one, considering he's been having lunch with us most days for the last few months."

Fielder turned again with a stony face.

"You're making some mistake," he said quietly. "I don't know anyone of the name of Cope, and as for you, young fellow, I've never set eyes on you before today."

He nodded to his companion and the pair of them left the public house together. Ignoring the curious looks of the other customers, Kain went on with his lunch.

Mr. Merriman was just finishing his dinner that evening when Thompson announced Hughes and Purvis. The three men adjourned to Merriman's study and coffee was brought.

"I had the police round this afternoon," said Mr. Hughes. "It was Cope they took out of the river this morning, apparently drowned, but there had been a blow on the head possibly sustained in falling."

"Or possibly administered before falling," said Fred Purvis.

"We shall have to give our information to the police now," said Merriman. "I should have liked to finish the case without them, but Cope's death makes that impossible. I hope young Kain is in no danger."

"I imagine he is in considerable danger. Can't you send him abroad or something?"

"Hardly—at the moment. But we could get him police protection, I expect." He got up and went to the telephone. "I'm taking no chances," he explained to the others. "I'm not going to leave this room till the guilty secret is revealed. Scotland Yard owes me a visit anyhow. But that's another story."

Detectives went through Mr. Hughes's accumulated evidence, they went through the Salvo archives, they searched the abandoned empty office in High Holborn, they hung about the pub that Cope and his friends had frequented, but they found nothing. Apart from the Pauls, who continued to lead a blameless life in the lower flat or at Paul's furniture shop in East Ham, the gang had melted away into thin air. The second day passed and no progress had been made.

During these two days Miss Chandler passed from a state of agitated anxiety into one of downright panic. She had attempted to get her telephone restored to action by ringing up exchange at the nearest public telephone box. But when she approached the box, a man had pushed past her and entered it. She had a feeling that she had seen this man before. She dared not ask Mrs. Paul's permission to use the downstairs phone, she dared not ask Mrs.

Durley to take a message for her. Twice more she had been intercepted on her way to the post, and relieved of letters to Florrie. The fact that she received no answers from her sister indicated that these letters never found their way into the post.

On the second day she took her basket and went shopping. She walked slowly, keeping her eyes open for suspicious persons. She intended to call at the post office for stamps and at the same time tell them there about her telephone. There were a good many people in the post office when she arrived, and she had to stand in a small queue at the section devoted to stamps. When her turn came, she made her purchase and was about to continue with her complaint when a woman next to her bumped her arm in such a way that she dropped her bag and had to stoop to pick it up. The woman stooped, too, hindering more than she helped and full of voluble apologies. When Margery Chandler stood upright again, she found that the queue had closed in behind her and her chance of speaking was gone unless she cared to wait or to tackle one of the other assistants. At this moment, as she stood hesitating, the woman who had made her drop her bag looked at her and smiled. It was a friendly smile, still a trifle apologetic, but to Margery's overwrought imagination it was a smile of triumph, a sinister smile, warning her that her efforts were fruitless. She shrank away and left the post office, her purpose unfulfilled.

Her next port of call was the grocer. Here she chose bacon and watched it being cut on the machine. The other customers round her seemed harmless enough; she thought she might screw up her courage to ask the man behind the counter for permission to use the shop's telephone. But as she made her request in a low, trembling voice, the man caught the eye of an acquaintance passing outside on the street. He nodded and winked, then pulled his pencil from behind his ear and made out Miss Chandler's bill.

"Just the bacon, wasn't it?" he said, looking up. His surprise at the blanched state of Miss Chandler's countenance fixed his own in an open stare. Her panic grew. Again she saw the features before her distorted, threatening. The conspiracy against her was growing if the familiar grocer's assistant was receiving signals from the street. She snatched her parcel from his outstretched hand and fled.

She dared not wait to finish her shopping now. She must get back before it was too late. Inside the locked door of the flat there would be respite. Unless she could tell the police! Seeing a tall,

uniformed figure approaching, she hurried towards it. Hardly had she got within speaking distance of him, however, when a stoutish woman, smartly dressed, stopped him to inquire the way to an address. Miss Chandler caught the woman's eye in passing. To her now fevered mind it looked at her with a hard, ruthless glance that froze her blood. She quickened her pace, half-running now, but desperately eager to find help in her extremity.

Then her heart leaped with renewed hope. Near the island in the middle of the road at a pedestrian crossing stood another policeman. Not looking at the oncoming traffic, she plunged towards him. A car missed her by inches, the owner leaning out to curse her as he passed.

Miss Chandler wilted, clutching her parcel and her bag. So they would stop at nothing!

"He tried to run me over," she cried breathlessly to the constable.

"You should look before you cross," answered the officer severely. "You can't blame the driver if you step off sudden, like you did."

"He tried—" began Miss Chandler again, but the constable stepped forward, held up the traffic on the other half of the road, and motioned her across. She turned to look at him reproachfully, but he had already released the waiting vehicles and they swept forward, cutting him off from her sight. She was abandoned to her fate. With tears running down her cheeks she started for home.

A little later Margery Chandler knelt at the bedside of her charge.

"You do understand, Nanny, don't you?" she cried again and again. "It's because I daren't stay here any longer, but I won't leave you, except in proper hands. If I say you're worse, they'll have to believe me. I'll come back to you if I can. But I daren't stay. I daren't stay."

The old woman slowly shook her head.

When Miss Chandler knocked at the front door of the downstairs flat a few minutes afterwards, it was opened by Mrs. Paul.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Miss Chandler?" she said in a rather loud voice.

"I wonder if I might use your phone," said the companion boldly. "Mine is out of order, and they haven't been to mend it yet. But my invalid has had a turn for the worse. I'm quite frightened about her. I want to get the doctor to see her."

"I'm ever so sorry to hear that," answered Mrs. Paul. "Won't you come inside? The phone is in the sitting room."

In fear and trembling Margery followed her. The room into which she was led looked out onto the front gate and the road. There had been voices inside as she drew near it, but when Mrs. Paul opened the door only Mr. Paul was within, sitting on the arm of a chair.

"Miss Chandler wants to phone for the doctor," explained Mrs. Paul. She led the companion to the telephone, which stood on a small table. Timidly Miss Chandler unhooked the receiver.

Mr. Hughes was in the office when the doctor rang up. He listened to the report and answered, "Are you speaking from the flat?" At the doctor's answer he whistled softly. "I'll come down at once." Then he went across to his partner's room.

"Miss Chandler has taken the law into her own hands," he announced.

"How?" inquired Fred Purvis, interested.

"She called in Dr. Wilson and told him Nanny was worse and ought to go into hospital. When he said he saw no signs of any serious development, she flatly refused to continue in charge, said she wouldn't take the responsibility. So he has just rung up to ask what he should do. Now this is the most significant point of the whole thing. I asked him if he was still at the flat, and what do you think he said?"

"Can't imagine."

"He said Miss Chandler's phone wasn't working, so he was ringing up from downstairs. Laugh that off!"

"Gosh, that's awkward. Downstairs will think all sorts of things."

"They'll think Margery Chandler has chosen a damned clever way of concentrating her forces. But I'm going down. The poor kid sounds half crazy with fright, according to Wilson. Babbling about being followed and being cut off from the outer world. I'd like to know why her phone isn't working."

"She'll hardly welcome you as you deserve, since she has cast you for the head villain's part," suggested Purvis.

"I can't help that. She'll know better when we're through with the job."

"Much better to tell the police and leave it to them," said Purvis. Hughes considered.

"No. I'd like to get the girl clear before we start any possibility

of a roughhouse. But if I don't ring you up here or at your place by eight, you can do anything that occurs to you."

"Right, I will. Take care of yourself."

Mr. Hughes went back to his own room and shut up his papers in the safe. He unlocked a drawer in his desk, took out a revolver and looked at it, then, shrugging his shoulders, put it away again. Taking his hat he walked out of the office.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it," said Mr. Hughes to Dr. Wilson, "that Miss Chandler must have a complete rest. She can go back to her sister for a couple of weeks, and we must get Nanny back into hospital. They know me well there. Let me come down to the phone with you and add my voice to yours if necessary."

Miss Chandler opened the front door for them. Dr. Wilson smiled reassuringly at her.

"We'll send the patient into hospital again for a bit, and you can have a rest," he said kindly.

"Oh, thank you," breathed Margery Chandler.

When the two men had gone, she hurried into Nanny's room and began to sort out the things the old woman would have to take with her.

Meanwhile the doctor and Mr. Hughes were admitted to the downstairs flat by Mrs. Paul. The sitting room was quite empty, but Mr. Hughes noticed that Mrs. Paul stood near the door, which she did not close.

When the necessary arrangements had been made for the transfer to hospital, Mr. Hughes quietly took over the receiver and called the exchange.

"My telephone is out of order," he complained, and gave details. Exchange promised to investigate the fault. Mr. Hughes hung up.

As Mrs. Paul showed him out of the flat, a telephone bell began to ring upstairs.

"That sounds like Miss Chandler's phone," said Mrs. Paul with a slow, unpleasant smile.

"So it does," agreed Mr. Hughes.

The doctor looked grave.

"I'm afraid I didn't test the accuracy of Miss Chandler's statement about the phone," he said. "But it would seem as if we were justified in relieving her of responsibility at present. You will be able to manage now, won't you?"

Mr. Hughes said yes, and thanked him. The doctor drove away,

while the solicitor went back to Miss Chandler. She approached him, half fearful, half defiant.

"The phone is working again," she said.

"So I heard," replied Mr. Hughes.

"They cut it off from downstairs, I know they did," went on Miss Chandler, her face working. "They didn't want me to speak to anyone. They took my letters, they followed me about, they tried to kill me. Now they've put it right. I expect you told them to!" She was aghast at what she had said, but she stood her ground.

"You had better get your things together and go now," said Mr. Hughes quietly. "I will go with Nanny to the hospital."

"I won't!" Miss Chandler's voice was low but exceedingly obstinate. "I'm not going to leave her till she's safe out of this awful place."

"If I hadn't fallen in love with you," answered Mr. Hughes steadily, "I should shake your silly head off."

"Oh!" Miss Chandler's voice rose to a high squeak of indignant, impotent rage. But as she had no answer to this devastating remark, she fled into Nanny's room to complete her preparations.

"I'll take the doctor's letter myself," she explained to the old woman, "but I want you to look after these notes, in case anything should happen to prevent—"

She did not finish her sentence but tucked a small folded piece of paper into the old woman's clenched and paralyzed left hand.

"There. Now it can't slip out, and it'll be there in case—"

The white L.C.C. ambulance drew up outside the gate, and the ambulance men came inside, bringing their stretcher with them. Miss Chandler went down to meet them.

While she was out of Nanny's room, Mr. Hughes slipped in and bent over the invalid.

"It won't be for long," he said. "Do you understand, Nanny? Not long. Soon I'll be able to tell her all about it, but till then it's safer for her as it is."

He caught sight of the note in the old woman's hand and slipping it out, read it rapidly, chuckling as he did so. Then with lightning speed he snatched a pencil out of his pocket, crossed out Margery's lurid appeal, and wrote a few short sentences instead. He finished, putting the note back just as the ambulance men entered the bedroom. After greeting them, he left the room and went downstairs.

The front door of the ground floor flat, he noticed, was ajar. With

a swift movement he put his foot into the gap. As he expected, Mrs. Paul was just inside, listening. He wasted no time but clapped a hand over her mouth and held it there, pinning her arms with his own. Voices came from the sitting room behind their silent struggling forms. The voice of Mr. Paul rose faintly above the murmur.

"We go in from the Fulham Road?"

Another voice exclaimed loudly, "No, you fool, from the back. Tukes is supposed to have been there all the time working."

Mr. Hughes heard the ambulance men coming down with their burden. He dared not continue to hold Mrs. Paul. He released her as quickly as he had made her prisoner and joined the group that had now reached the foot of the stairs.

Three men including Mr. Paul were sitting round a bridge table on which lay a sketch map. They raised their heads as Mrs. Paul shot, breathless, into the room.

"Hughes!" she gasped.

The three men jumped to their feet.

"What about him?"

"He forced the door open! He heard what you were saying! I couldn't do a thing. He had hold of me, nearly choking me!"

Paul bounded past her to the door of the room.

"Has he gone?"

"How do I know? I came straight in to tell you."

At the front door Mr. Hughes took Miss Chandler's arm and said rapidly, "I am not mad. Remember this. The Fulham Road. Have you got it? Fulham Road."

Miss Chandler shook herself free and without a word hurried after the stretcher.

"I'll come along with you," Mr. Hughes said to the ambulance men, "if you've room for me as well as the lady."

Miss Chandler bit her lip. At all costs she must shake him off. The thought of being shut up in the ambulance with a helpless invalid and a man who was obviously insane was more than she could contemplate.

"Oh dear," she cried helplessly, "I forgot to shut the door of the flat, or the windows."

"I'll go," said Mr. Hughes, not suspecting her of guile. Miss Chandler climbed into the ambulance but a second later she put out her head.

"I think we ought to start," she said. "The patient looks worse to me. Doctor said it was urgent."

The ambulance driver was already in his seat. The second man had his hand on the steps.

"Mr. Hughes is sure to follow," said Miss Chandler. "I'll explain to him why we didn't wait."

"Okay, miss," said the man. He shut the door and jumped to his seat beside the driver, and the ambulance started just as Mr. Hughes, running down the stairs, arrived in the hall. He saw the tail of the ambulance pass away down the road. Immediately afterwards a man turned in at the gate. Hughes stepped aside to allow him to pass into the hall, but the man stood on the top step looking over the solicitor's shoulder. His gaze was so fixed that Hughes swung round. Three men and Mrs. Paul had come out of the ground floor flat and were ranged behind him, waiting silently. Mrs. Paul broke the silence.

"It is Mr. Hughes, isn't it? We have met before—quite recently." Her smile was cruelly triumphant. "You must allow me to return good for evil and offer you a drink."

Hughes measured his chances four to one, not counting Mrs. Paul. The noise of a scuffle might penetrate to the street, but the house stood well back from the road. Besides, an open quarrel or fight would serve no useful purpose. Paul himself might be fairly important, but the other men were not. Kain's description of Tukes and the Boss did not fit any of those present.

With a shrug and a smile he bowed.

"Delighted," he said, and walked forward into the flat. The four men followed and shut the door.

**T**he ambulance men deposited the patient in a cubicle in the casualty department of the hospital and went away. The nurse at the reception desk began to take particulars from Miss Chandler, while another nurse went into the cubicle to attend to Nanny.

Presently a house physician in a white coat arrived. Seeing Miss Chandler still struggling with the questionnaire, he went on into the cubicle. But he soon reappeared and went up to the reception desk.

"Did you come with this patient?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Miss Chandler.

"I found this paper in her hand."

"Oh!" cried Margery Chandler, very flustered, "I quite forgot. I put it there in case I was prevented from coming. But I managed to get away, and now I shall be free to ring up the police from my sister's as soon as—"

She stopped, realizing that her stream of words must seem extraordinary to a stranger.

The house physician looked at her curiously.

"You wrote this note, did you?" he said slowly.

"Yes—yes, I did."

"Then why is it signed John Hughes?" asked the house physician.

Forgetting herself in her shock and agitation, Miss Chandler snatched the paper from his hand. It read, "To the finder of this note, and praying heaven this be not Margery Chandler.

"The above lady, mistakenly thinking me the head of a criminal gang of fire-raisers, has by her action on behalf of the invalid in her care precipitated matters that were in course of coming to a head. Kindly inform immediately the police and/or Mr. Merriman of the Salvo Fire and Accident Insurance Company and Mr. Purvis of Messrs. Hughes and Purvis Solicitors, of the course of events and ask them to withhold action until eight o'clock but not beyond that time. Send Miss Chandler to her sister's house at once. John Hughes."

"I won't go!" cried Margery Chandler, white with the shock of this revealing note.

"Could you tell me what all this is about?" asked the house physician patiently.

"Oh, how could I ever have suspected him?" moaned Margery, as the full extent of her error became clear to her. "How could I be so wickedly, cruelly mistaken as to think he could ever do anything wrong?"

"If you just stopped asking questions and told the doctor what's the matter, we might be able to help you," said the nurse tartly.

But Miss Chandler was not listening to anything but the voice of her remorse, and a fresh agonizing thought had just struck her.

"Oh, my God!" she almost screamed, "I left him there, at the mercy of those fiends!"

She snatched up her gloves and bag, which she had laid on the reception desk, and rushed for the entrance, followed by the house physician, who imagined that he had a mental case to deal with.

Avoiding the porter who was darting from his lodge, and taking the hospital steps in two stupendous and not ungraceful hops, Miss

Chandler reached the street and flung herself at the first taxi in the rank in the middle of it.

"Scotland Yard," she panted.

The driver of the second taxi, who was talking to the first, took his hand off the bonnet.

"Wot you got?" he asked laconically. "Escaped lunatic?"

"Shouldn't wonder. Scotland Yard, she says."

"Well, if she tries any funny business on the way down, you can always give 'er in charge when you reach yer destination, can't yer?"

Some time later Miss Chandler sat, dissolved in tears, beside Detective-Inspector Carter's table. Mr. Purvis sat near her, and Mr. Merriman leaned over her, patting her shoulder. Kain stood behind Merriman and glowered at the distressing exhibition. The clock on the wall said seven fifteen.

"You must not blame yourself so heavily," said Mr. Merriman in a soothing voice. "He has not rung up yet, but that does not necessarily mean that anything has happened to him."

"I took the ambulance away. He was planning to escape in it. They would not have dared touch him with the ambulance men there. I spoilt his plan. I left him at their mercy."

"This Mr. Hughes seems to be a particularly resourceful person," said Inspector Carter kindly. "He will turn up all right, I'm sure."

Miss Chandler raised a tearstained face to the three men.

"If anything happens to him," she said passionately, "I'll never forgive myself. If any harm comes to him it'll kill me, it will indeed."

At the precise moment that Miss Chandler uttered these words, Mr. Hughes's fortunes had reached a very low ebb. For he was securely gagged and bound to a chair in the back room on the top floor of a shop in the Fulham Road. At the other end of the room a pile of rubbish on which paraffin had been poured was arranged in the form of a bonfire, and Paul, assisted by Tukes, was fixing a fuse to the pile. Standish stood beside the helpless solicitor pointing out the beauties of his scheme.

"You have done such good work, Hughes. It is a pity it should all come to nothing. They will not even know it is your body, they will think it is George who has perished in the flames of his own shop. It is fortunate his clothes fit you not too badly. The few fragments they will find will help the identification, and George

can have a few tucks taken in your suit when he arrives abroad. We are flying, did I tell you? When we have seen you on your way. Look!"

He dived in his pocket and produced three strings of jewels that flashed and glittered in his palm.

"We have our money with us in international currency, you see? Equal divisions. We may be separated—who knows?"

The others had finished their work. They came up and received their share of the booty. Paul put his into the inside of his cigarette lighter. Tukes made a tiny hole in the lining of Hughes's coat and dropped his through it. Standish looked at his watch.

"At half past eleven," he said, "we shall light the fuse and wish you goodbye and a speedy journey to eternity."

At Scotland Yard the same people sat in Inspector Carter's room.

"The fact that they have given up the Holborn office suggests that they have decided to go to ground for a bit," said the inspector. "But they are likely to try some final stunt to provide them with the means to stay hidden. The question is what, and where?"

"Probably another fire," suggested Merriman.

"Possibly, though they would hardly dare to claim on it now."

"It would be like Standish's infernal cheek to stage a super fire and get someone else to claim for him."

"I expect Hughes is following them with the same idea in mind," said Purvis.

"I'm sure he isn't," said Miss Chandler. "He wanted to come away in the ambulance. There were several voices in the flat, I heard them."

"So you said before." The inspector considered.

"You think Hughes knew something, or had found out something? But he didn't say anything to you about it?"

"Of course not. He never told me anything at all. That was how I became so mistaken. Oh!" cried Miss Chandler, and stopped speaking with her mouth open.

"Well?"

"It was just before I sent him back to lock up the flat. He said, Fulham Road. Don't forget. Fulham Road!"

"Why the devil didn't you say so before?" snapped the inspector and dialed a number.

A rapid succession of phone calls followed, at the end of which Inspector Carter rose to his feet.

"There is nothing doing in the Fulham Road at the moment, but I shall take a chance on it and go down. You people had better wait here."

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the sort," said Miss Chandler. "You can't keep me here, you know you can't."

Mr. Merriman restrained her with a hand on her shoulder.

"My car's outside," he said. "We'll go together."

The clock on the wall said eleven precisely.

**T**he burning fuse crept nearer to the pile.

"Time we went," said Standish. "So long, nosy."

He kicked viciously at Hughes's shin as he passed him. The three men left the room, shutting the door behind them. Their footsteps clattered on the stairs.

The moment they were out of hearing, Hughes, with a violent effort, rocked his chair to and fro. It fell with a crash, and digging his heels into the ground, he pushed himself away from the petrol-soaked heap of rubbish. He was none too soon. He had managed to roll and propel himself into the far corner of the room when the fuse reached the pile. It went up with a roar, and the room was immediately ablaze.

With the force of its igniting, a faggot of blazing wood landed near Hughes and lay burning on the floor. He twisted round, chair and all, and by rolling and wriggling brought his bound arms to the flame and deliberately set them against it to burn through the rope that held him. The process was agonizingly painful, but it was his only chance. He stuck it grimly, wondering if the smoke that was choking him would give him time to succeed.

At last the rope parted and his arms were free. He found a scarf in George's coat and wrapped it about his streaming face. The room was an inferno, the heat blistering his skin, and the smoke scorched his lungs. With a final effort he dragged his legs free and, staggering to the door, pulled it open and plunged into the smoke-filled passage beyond.

The Fulham Road was comparatively empty when the party from Scotland Yard reached it. A few cars and buses, a few passersby hardly disturbed the quiet.

The police car cruised slowly along with an officer standing alert on the runningboard.

"Look!" he cried suddenly.

The car stopped and Carter jumped out. Over the housetops a plume of smoke was rising into the still air. As they watched, a glow appeared beneath it, red and menacing. There was, unmistakably, a house on fire.

As the officer on the runningboard leaped off and dashed to a nearby fire alarm, the police car shot forward to the burning building, and Carter, leaping out, ran up to the door and hammered at it. There was no sound or movement from within.

At the sudden furious knocking on the door of the shop, the three criminals in the back room stood frozen into statues of alarm.

Standish whispered, "Someone's seen the smoke. They'll give the alarm. We must leave by the back. If anyone sees you, pretend to be trying to get in to help."

They moved out of the back room. The door into the shop was open, and from the street beyond came a growing volume of sound. In the distance a fire engine clanged, and then another.

"Jump to it, boys," ordered Standish.

A puff of smoke rolled down the stairs, making them cough. They groped their way towards the back door, but they were too late. A resounding knock upon it threw them into a frightened bunch, clutching at one another, panic-stricken at the way their plan had miscarried.

"Who the hell?" snarled Paul, pulling out his gun.

"Listen, will you?"

Above the clanging of the fire engines, the crackling of the fire, and the cries of the crowd without came unmistakably the voice of authority, shouting orders.

"The busies!" muttered Tukes, licking his dry lips. The smoke was increasing, rolling down the stairs in great clouds. Their eyes watered, they were choking.

Standish made for the stairs. "The next house!" he cried. "Over the roof!"

Paul twisted his handkerchief round his mouth and leaped ahead into the smoke.

"No!" screamed Tukes. "We'll never get past. Three together stand no chance. One alone might, but not three. Burn if you like. I'm through."

He turned back, making for the door of the shop. Standish's hand flashed to his pocket, there was a report, and Tukes lay crumpled halfway to the door.

Paul, on the first landing, heard the shot. He turned back, peer-

ing down the stairs, gun at the ready. Standish stood at the bottom. He had coolly dragged off the dead man's borrowed coat and changed it for his own. He smiled as he felt the jewels in the lining of it. His right hand was behind his back.

"He's gone," he called up to Paul. "Said there was no chance for three going together."

Paul slipped the covering off his mouth.

"Come on then!" he yelled. "What are you waiting for?"

"I agree with Tukes. One alone stands the best chance," answered Standish. Quite deliberately he took aim and fired. Paul swayed, doubled up, and fell forward to the foot of the stairs. Standish put Paul's cigarette lighter in his trouser pocket. Then, wrapping his own and the dead man's handkerchiefs about his face, he began to climb the stairs.

Mr. Hughes, torn, burnt, and exhausted, clinging to the banisters, crawled slowly down towards the first landing. Above and behind him the fire roared more fiercely than ever.

Outside in the street the Fire Brigade got their hoses trained, the escapes raised. Two firemen attacked the door and shattered windows of the shop with hatchets. Close to the escape, within the police cordon, Miss Chandler and her friends stood watching in anxious fear.

"I know he's there. Oh God, I know he's there!" she cried, again and again.

Standish went steadily up, through smoke and increasing heat. Hughes crept painfully down, unaware of his danger. A meeting seemed inevitable. But the fire had done its work, the murderer's own act was his undoing. As the two men came nearer, enveloped in clouds of smoke, there was a tremendous crash. The roof had fallen in upon the top floor.

A shower of debris and burning sparks fell all about them. Hughes with a mighty effort flung himself into the doorway of a room on the first landing and escaped the flaming avalanche, but Standish, holding on to the banisters to guide himself, fared worse. A beam falling down the well of the staircase struck him on the side of the head as it passed. He collapsed on the landing, his legs sprawling over the broken staircase.

Mr. Hughes, not seeing him in the smoke, began to feel his way down the last flight.

\* \* \*

The door and window gave before the firemen's blows. They disappeared into the smoke within. A moment later one of them came out, the limp body of Tukes over his shoulder. He laid him down and gave a cry of alarm and astonishment. The man's back was soaked with blood from a bullet wound that had penetrated to his heart.

"Shot!" the fireman cried incredulously.

"It's Tukes!" screamed Miss Chandler. "I knew John was here! I knew it!"

She gave one wild look round her and before anyone could prevent it plucked off her hat, wound her scarf about her face, and dashed into the burning shop, past the second fireman, who was just emerging with the body of Paul.

Miss Chandler battled her way through the blinding smoke to the foot of the stairs. A figure, its face wrapped about with rags, confronted her. But she was desperate. She had come to save John Hughes or perish in the attempt. She threw herself forward.

But though Miss Chandler did not see that it was Mr. Hughes with whom she struggled, he had recognized her, and determined to remove her from danger. He was not surprised to see her there. In this wild nightmare anything was possible. But Miss Chandler was fresh, and he was very nearly exhausted. She won without difficulty and, going on hands and knees, began to crawl upstairs. Mr. Hughes, exasperated but heroic, followed.

Up and up they crawled, through the smoke, the heat, the water from the hoses, the deafening noise. Up till they reached the landing and the prostrate body of Standish, clad in Hughes's coat that he had taken from Tukes's dead body. Miss Chandler recognized it, and her energy was increased tenfold. She did not bother to inspect the fallen man's swathed head. Her beloved's coat was proof enough. And there was no time to be lost. She began to pull and tug at Standish's legs. Hughes tried to stop her, but she shook him off with flashing eyes. He shrugged his shoulders and gave her what help his failing strength allowed. Together they dragged the murderer out into the street just as the staircase of the shop fell in ruins behind them.

**I**nspector Carter turned Standish's body over, pulled the handkerchief off his face, and whistled.

"Slick Jim!" he said slowly.

Mr. Hughes, who had fallen beside the murderer, sat up, pulling his scarf off his own face.

"Who?" he asked.

"Slick Jim Harper. Confidence man. North of England, chiefly. Not operated in London for some years, as far as we know. He was seen in Leeds a while back. He's got fat since his last conviction. I didn't know him from Mr. Kain's description."

Miss Chandler, also relieved of her scarf, followed this conversation in horror and amazement. She cried out at the end of it. Mr. Hughes looked up at her with mock severity.

"I thought—I thought," faltered Miss Chandler, "he was you and you were one of them."

"You would," said John Hughes serenely.

She turned and fled. Mr. Hughes sighed and got up, wrapping the handkerchiefs round his blistered wrists. The first-aid men were approaching with a stretcher from the ambulance. He waved them aside, pointing at Standish, and went after Miss Chandler.

He found her with her head in her arms, leaning against the back of a fire engine.

"Margery," said Mr. Hughes. He had to repeat her name before she lifted her head. Then he went on. "Did you go into that burning house to look for me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I made that ghastly mistake. It was my fault they got you. All my fault. I wanted to find you or—die."

"We'll get married quite soon," said Mr. Hughes briskly. "There's no point in waiting, is there?"

"Oh, John!"

Mr. Merriman with Purvis and Kain came crowding about them. "I do congratulate you," began Merriman most heartily.

Mr. Hughes looked bashful.

"How did you know?" he murmured.

"It was a brilliant piece of work," pursued Merriman. "You brought him out alive. We shall clear the whole case up, and with any luck he'll swing for the murder of Tukes and Paul."

"Oh, I see what you mean," said Mr. Hughes.

He snatched Miss Chandler's hand and pulled her rapidly away. The crowd stared at the two ecstatic beings who burst through their ranks. Hughes stopped a taxi in the road beyond the crowd,

bundled Margery Chandler in, and followed her. They sat looking into one another's smoke-grimed faces.

The taximan turned his head and spoke through his little window.

"Where to?" he inquired.

"The Dorchester," Mr. Hughes answered, adding for Margery's benefit, "to celebrate."

"Where?" asked the driver incredulously.

"The Dorchester. In Park Lane," John Hughes repeated. "Haven't you heard of it?"

The taximan gave his fare a withering look that was entirely wasted on that preoccupied person. Then he put his cab into motion with a jerk that flung the lovers into one another's willing arms.

# The Last Downhill

by Clark Howard

**H**arlow carried his skis to the base of the lower chair lift and sat down on a bench to put them on.

"Well, Mr. Harlow," said Jerry, the lift operator, "you're almost the last one at the lodge this season. Nearly everyone else has left."

"I'm not *almost* the last," Harlow corrected. "I *am* the last."

"Not quite," said Jerry. "A new guest checked in last night."

Harlow locked on his right ski. "New guest? Who?"

"Don't know. Haven't even seen him. But Mr. Boles called from the desk and said to keep the lift running after you went up; said the new guest would be going up, too."

Harlow stood up and tensed his toes and arch, adjusting the fit. "Did Boles say what the new guest's name was?"

"No, sir. But that looks like him coming now." Jerry bobbed his chin toward the three hundred yard trail that led from the lodge to the lift.

Harlow squinted toward the moving figure. The man's gait looked vaguely familiar—or was he just imagining it? "Kind of unusual for someone to check in

on the last day of the season, isn't it?"

Jerry shrugged. "Skiers are like golfers, Mr. Harlow; sometimes they don't know when to quit. No offense."

Harlow stared at the advancing figure for another few seconds, then said, "Get the lift moving. I'm ready."

He dropped onto the first chair that swung by and settled into it for the ten minute trip up to the first ridge. On the way up, he twisted to look back down at the lone figure moving toward the lift base. He couldn't get it out of his mind that the walk was familiar. Could it possibly be one of them?

Alan?

Pudge?

Leo?

**T**he four of them had grown up on skis. When they were eight and ten, they had easily mastered the junior runs around Moose Head, where they all lived. At twelve and fourteen they were experts on the intermediate slopes. By the time they were sixteen, they were better than most adults and the great high runs from the

unseen summits were as familiar to them as their own bedrooms. Everyone in town talked about how they constantly tried to out do one another, and how they were so equal in skill it was hard to tell them apart on the upper snowfields. Even Pudge, who was twenty pounds overweight, held his own in dexterity and maneuverability with his leaner, trimmer companions.

Pudge was Harlow's cousin; Alan and Leo were not related to them, but the four had grown up closer than brothers, practically inseparable. Over the years they had done everything together: played Pop Warner football and American Legion baseball, built a treehouse, gone to see *Shane* nine times, ridden a freight train down the mountain of Salinas and hitch hiked back, worked the fruit groves during the summer, the ski runs on weekends during the school year. And in everything they were as near equal as possible. Four young colts in a dead heat every time they left the gate.

Then, in their senior year of high school, Harlow pulled ahead of them by just an edge. On the slopes. Alan, Pudge, and Leo noticed it first, then the rest of the town. On the downhill runs, Harlow became just a shade better.

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At the first ridge, Harlow dropped out of the chair and pushed over to the edge to look down. Back at the base he could see the other man just getting into a chair for the ride up. Even if it was one of them, he thought, what would it matter? He had a ten minute lead and was better than any of them.

He'd been better since they were all seventeen years old. Better all through the decade of their twenties. And their thirties. And now, at forty-one, he was still better. None of them could catch him on the downhill. Especially on the high ones where he could pick up speed and momentum.

He pushed over to the self-operated control box for the middle lift that went up to the second ridge, another fifteen minutes higher. Activating it, he slipped into the first chair across the pad and started his second ascent.

Looking back, he could see that the man coming up on the lower lift had put on a bright red ski cap.

Alan, he thought. Alan had always worn bright red ski caps. Usually ones that Marcy had knitted for him. Marcy was the head cheerleader their last year in high school. Her family had moved to the mountains from Kansas, so she didn't know how to ski. Everybody said she looked

like Debbie Reynolds. She and Alan were steadies. Harlow, Pudge, and Leo were forever trying to get Alan to tell them whether he'd made it with Marcy or not, but Alan would never say. Pudge and Leo did not think he had; Harlow disagreed with them. Harlow was sure Marcy was not a virgin. But he had to wait until two years after they graduated to prove it.

Harlow had stopped in at the drugstore where Marcy worked, the day after Alan left for the army.

"So old Alan is a soldier-boy now," he said, drinking a fountain Coke. "Hup-two-three-four."

"Don't joke about it," Marcy said, wiping off the marble countertop. "I just hope he doesn't get hurt."

"He'll be all right," Harlow assured her. "It's just a police action, not a real war. More like guard duty. Old Alan will come marching home in a couple of years and you two can get married and start making babies." As Marcy bent over the counter, Harlow got a glimpse down her dress. "You know, Marce, Alan and I are best friends. He asked me to look after you while he was gone."

Marcy gave him a dubious look. "Sure he did."

"No, listen, really, I'm serious. He said he wanted to make

sure you didn't just sit around bored all the time. He asked me to take you to a movie now and then. But I've got a better idea than that."

"I'll bet you have."

"Be serious, Marce. You know how Alan was always going to teach you how to ski, but you two never seemed to get around to it? Well, what if I was to teach you while he was away? Wouldn't that be a great surprise for him when he came home?"

Marcy beamed. "Why, that's a wonderful idea!"

"Yeah. You two could really have fun on the slopes together. What do you say?"

She said yes, and that had been the start of it with them.

Harlow took her out every weekend. He patiently worked her on the beginners' run; patiently worked her on the longer intermediate slopes; patiently worked her on the gradual bowls and the easy snowfields; and patiently worked her into bed with him one Saturday night nearly a year after Alan had left.

"God, I'm so ashamed," she said when it was over.

"I don't see why. You've obviously done it before."

"Only with Alan. And we're going to be married."

Harlow took her in his arms. "Come on now. This is 1955. The world is growing up. What you

and I do can't hurt anyone. Alan will never know."

And he probably never would have. Except that Marcy became pregnant. And Harlow arranged for her to go to San Francisco to an abortionist. Abortions were still being done on kitchen tables in 1955. That was where Marcy died: on a kitchen table.

When Alan got back from the army and learned all the details, he swore he'd kill Harlow. But by that time, Harlow had left town.

At the upper ridge, Harlow dropped out of the chair and turned at once to look back down to the lower ridge. The other man on the lift had reached the lower ridge five minutes before Harlow reached the upper, and Harlow was anxious to see if he was coming any higher. He was not; he was standing next to the control box, one hand on it, looking up at Harlow. I'm fifteen minutes ahead of him now instead of ten, Harlow thought. That had always been very important to Harlow: staying a comfortable distance ahead of other people.

He watched as the figure below kept staring up at him. Then, in a movement that made Harlow involuntarily shiver, the man waved to him. Actually

waved. Raised one hand and gave it a little twist of the wrist.

Just like Pudge used to do. Harlow's mouth went dry as he saw the man activate the middle lift and hop onto a chair to come up.

Pudge? Could it actually be Pudge? Could he have dried out, come back from the depths of alcoholism, got himself in shape again, and gone back to the skis?

Harlow grunted softly. Not that it mattered. Pudge could not catch him anyway. Could not even keep up with him. Never had been able to.

Harlow's father and Pudge's father had been brothers. They and their wives had been killed in a jet crash on the way to Bermuda. A third brother, Harlow and Pudge's Uncle Thomas, had been made their guardian until they came of age. Thomas was a bachelor, in the lumber business back in Michigan. He took their insurance money and made both boys his partners. Pudge went off to college to learn accounting, but Harlow, who had never liked school, went right to work in the lumber mill. He stayed at Uncle Thomas's right side: in the forest, cutting and sawing; on the lakes, sending the wood downstream; at the mill, grading, processing; and by the time Pudge got his degree

and returned, Harlow knew as much about the business as Uncle Thomas did.

"You ought to let me take over for you, Uncle," Harlow told the older man. "Let me do the work. You'll still get your third. What's the matter, don't you think I can do it?"

"You could do it, all right," his uncle said. "But I'd be afraid of the shortcuts you like to take. I've seen you order trees cut that needed another year of growth; seen you grade wood high when it should've been graded low; seen you sell outside our contracts for a kickback. Your ethics need to mature a little, my boy. You need to develop a sense of values beyond immediate profit. I expect it'll be a while before I can let you take over."

Uncle Thomas was an ex-lumberjack and a hard-drinking man. Pudge, Harlow learned, had also developed a taste for hard liquor while at college. Uncle Thomas and Pudge started drinking together. Before long it became a common sight to see the older man and his nephew at a corner table in the big saloon near the mill. Sometimes they could even be seen stumbling out together, arm in arm.

One bitterly cold January night, as Uncle Thomas and Pudge were walking along the dock on their way home, a six-foot log rolled off the top of the

next day's load and knocked them both into the icy lake. Some other customers from the saloon heard their cries and managed to pull Pudge out, but Uncle Thomas got caught under an ice floe and drowned. No one was ever able to figure out how just one log got loose from the chained stack.

After Harlow and Pudge inherited the business, Harlow took over running it while Pudge mostly just kept on drinking. Pudge blamed himself for Uncle Thomas's death, and Harlow did nothing to dissuade him from the notion. The more Pudge stayed drunk, the better Harlow liked it. Eventually Harlow went to court and had Pudge committed to a sanatorium for alcoholics, and Pudge's half of the business put under his guardianship. Harlow heard some years later that Pudge had been convinced by a psychiatrist that he was blameless in Uncle Thomas's death, and Pudge had even subsequently hinted to some friends that he suspected Harlow of letting loose the log that hit them. That kind of talk did not bother Harlow, however. By then he had disposed of the lumber business, absorbed Pudge's share, and moved on to new pastures.

Harlow activated the upper lift and took a chair all the way to the summit of the mountain.

It was a ten minute ride and when he reached the top he looked back and saw the other man just getting off at the second ridge. He was still a good ten minutes ahead of him. As soon as the man—whoever he was—boarded the upper lift and got far enough above the ridge to prevent his jumping out of the chair, Harlow would push off and start down the run. As fast as he was on the downhill, and as familiar as he had become with the slopes during the past three weeks, he would be back on the bottom, at the lodge, packed and in his car, by the time this man—who would have to take it very slowly—got halfway down.

Harlow pushed over to the guard rail and waited. And watched. The man in the red cap stood right where Harlow had stood a few minutes earlier, except that he was looking up instead of down. He made no move to activate the upper lift, which had stopped as soon as Harlow had dropped off at the summit. He didn't seem to be in any hurry, Harlow thought. He was just looking up at Harlow, and looking around at the sky and the terrain, from where he was up to where Harlow was. Okay, sport, take your time, Harlow thought. I can wait it out as long as you can.

Harlow looked at the sky, too.

It was slate blue, solid and clear, with a dazzling high-altitude sun. The temperature, he guessed, was in the mid-twenties, the air thin and exhilarating. It had snowed during the early morning and from the summit it looked as if there was a whole mountain of untracked powder. It was a beautiful sight, one that Harlow would have enjoyed immensely had it not been for the other man down on the ridge.

Looking back down, Harlow's eyes widened as he saw the figure bend and scoop up enough fresh snow for a snowball. The man rolled it over and over, packing it tighter between his mitten hands; then he tossed it up, caught it once, and threw it at a nearby ponderosa. It hit the tree dead center and splattered.

Harlow watched transfixed. It's Leo, he thought. It had to be Leo. A thousand times as a boy he had seen Leo do that exact same thing: make a snowball, toss it up and catch it first, then hit a tree dead center.

When Harlow sold the lumber business, he moved to Minneapolis and became a building contractor. It seemed like the natural thing to do. Several retail lumber dealers who had bought his inferior grades of wood were in Minneapolis, so he

knew who to do business with. He had plenty of capital; all he really needed was a front man. He put in a long distance call to his old boyhood pal, Leo.

"Harlow, where the hell are you?" Leo asked, surprised. "Quite a few people are looking for you: Marcy's two brothers, Alan, Pudge and his lawyers—"

"Never mind who's looking for me, Leo. What are you doing in the way of work these days?"

"Working uptown at Walgreen's. I'm the assistant manager," Leo said proudly.

"A drugstore clerk!" Harlow scoffed.

"It's not a bad job," Leo said defensively. "Got some nice fringe benefits."

"Yeah, free razor blades. Listen, Leo, how would you like to make some serious money? I'm about to go into a new business where I really don't know anybody. I need a right-hand man, somebody I can trust. Are you interested?"

"Is it legal?"

"Of course it's legal," Harlow said, trying to sound indignant.

Leo was interested. Harlow swore him to secrecy, then told him where he was. He sent Leo enough money for him and his family to leave town quietly. After Leo joined Harlow in Minneapolis, they established Prestige Homes and started purchasing land. Soon they be-

gan to erect a tract of town-houses in the seventy-five thousand dollar range.

"You're the organized one, Leo, so I'm putting you in charge of running the general office," Harlow told him. "I'm going to be out in the field supervising the construction, ordering materials, and that sort of thing. I'll also be doing the selling and promoting, so I won't have any time for paperwork. You handle the money for us; I'll pass invoices on to you and you can see that they get paid."

Leo was gratified at his responsible position. He was also impressed with the expertise Harlow showed in establishing the business, acquiring the land and building permits, subcontracting the surveying and all the necessary craftsmen, and personally ordering the lumber and all the other materials needed. It pleased him to see how much everyone liked Harlow, and how well he treated all the people associated with Prestige Homes. Leo began to think that the people back home who spoke badly of Harlow were very much mistaken about him.

"I was as leery of this move as you were at first," he told his wife after they had been in Minneapolis a month, "but now I think it's going to work out just fine. Can you believe Harlow's paying me *three* times what I

was getting at the drugstore? I really don't mind buying my razor blades at all!"

Business boomed. People bought the townhouses as fast as the bank would approve their loans. Within four months the first ones were completed, the city safety inspector approved them for occupancy, and families began to move in.

At every opportunity, Harlow praised Leo for his work. "Bringing you into this business was the smartest move I ever made," he said with a pat on the back. "The way you've run this office has been more help than you can imagine. I've been able to devote my time to the building and selling without a single worry about the office procedure and the paperwork. Speaking of paperwork, incidentally, we topped off six more units yesterday. Sign these certificates of completion for me, will you?"

Leo was so accustomed by then to signing reams of paper every week that he did it without a second thought. The certificates of completion were statements attesting that all top-grade materials had been used in the construction of the townhouses: top-grade lumber, cement mix, wiring, and plumbing. The certificates were filed with the city safety office when a final safety inspection was requested. The final inspection

was a cursory one: carpets laid properly, heating apparatus vented properly, electrical outlets capped—that sort of thing. The important inspections were supposed to have been done during construction, when the inspector could see the cement mix, the wiring, the pipes—and the lumber. But the inspector who conducted those inspections was driving a new car, a gift from Harlow.

Sometimes inferior materials in a home go undetected for years. Second-grade lumber, for instance, might take a decade to deteriorate, and then present no more serious a problem than some minor refurbishing. But in the case of the Prestige Homes townhouses, the builder—and one buyer—were not so lucky. Thirty-seven days after the Lemmer family moved into Unit Number 268, the landing between the first and second floors collapsed and killed Mr. Lemmer.

It was the biggest building scandal to hit Minneapolis in years. Construction was ordered suspended at once. State investigators arrived to inspect some still unfinished units. Samples of the low-grade lumber being used were impounded. The city inspector who had approved for occupancy the Lemmer dwelling was suspended. Harlow and Leo

were both indicted by a grand jury.

At the subsequent trial it was shown by Harlow's attorney that at no time had he ever put his signature on any document connected with Prestige—not an order, an invoice, a check, a subcontract, a sales contract, or (most important) a certificate of completion. It had all been Leo, right down the line. Leo had signed the order for low-grade lumber; Leo had paid for it; and Leo had signed the certificate attesting that *high*-grade lumber had been used in the Lemmer townhouse. Clearly, Leo was the culprit.

Harlow was acquitted. Leo got eight years.

So now Leo's back, Harlow thought, looking down from the summit of the ski run. The man in the red cap was still on the middle ridge, looking up at him. Harlow grunted softly. It was obvious to him what Leo planned to do. Wait on the middle ridge until Harlow started his downhill run, then push off the ridge and intercept him somewhere halfway down the mountain. Clever. But not clever enough.

Or was it? Harlow looked behind him, past the back side of the mountain. On the horizon, clearly visible, was a line of black that looked like dirty fumes from an exhaust.

A storm.

Damn, Harlow thought. One of those early spring snowstorms that came out of nowhere. Very cold, very quiet, little or no wind. He could not tell how fast it was moving—but surely it would be over the run to the lodge within an hour.

He looked back down at Leo. Or was it Pudge? No, it was Leo. The waiting game was definitely on Leo's side: he could simply stay on the ridge until the storm forced Harlow to make a downhill run.

Harlow wet his dry, cold lips. Pushing over, he looked down the back side of the mountain. He saw a long, easy run down a gently sloping bowl that dropped about a thousand feet to a tree line. Beyond that, although he could not see it, was probably another run, perhaps two or three, the rest of the way down. At the bottom would be the highway, going around the base of the mountain to the lodge. Harlow smiled. Suppose he were to ski down the back side before Pudge—Leo, that is—even knew he was off the summit? Once he made it to the highway, it would be easy to pick up a ride around to the lodge. Leo would think he was still up on the summit. And by the time he became suspicious enough to ride the upper lift to the top to see for himself, Har-

low could be back at the lodge and on the road.

Harlow again looked across the sky where the storm was brewing. Definitely moving this way, he told himself. Got to decide one way or another.

He pushed back to the summit rail and looked down at the ridge again. The red cap was still clearly visible, not moving.

Okay, Harlow made up his mind, the back side it is then. He stood at the rail for several moments, long enough to be seen. Then he pushed away, buttoned the collar of his ski jacket, and put his mittens back on. After staying out of sight for five minutes, he moved back to the rail and let himself be seen again. By then he was sure that Leo was used to his disappearing for several minutes at a time.

So long, chump, he thought as he pushed away for the last time. He slid quickly to the back lip of the summit, paused just seconds to put his goggles in place and close his face flap, and pushed skillfully over the edge.

The entire back side of the mountain was an uninterrupted sheet of untracked powder, the top few inches still loose from its early-morning fall. As Harlow made his run, high, billowing plumes of snow curled up in his wake. It was a magnificent run, one of the best of his life. It had

been a long time since he had felt such elation.

At the bottom of the run, near the first tree line, he turned into a smooth, professional halt and looked around. He was on a flat meadow, or maybe a frozen pond, about a fourth of the way down. There was no other run in sight. Beyond the stand of trees, he thought: that's where it's likely to be. He pushed forward across the level ground, toward the trees. Before he got to them, his shadow suddenly vanished from in front of him. Looking up, he saw that the first small dark clouds of the storm had arrived; one of them had blotted out the sun.

Pushing onward, he reached the trees, zigzagged through them—finding that they were very shallow—and cleared them on the other side. And there was the next run, a shorter one, leading down to the next lower ridge. Just as he started to push off, a glimpse of color caught his attention. He looked up at one of the ridges above the trees—and saw a figure in a red cap cutting down a narrow, twisting run like a professional. What the hell—? That couldn't be Leo, he thought. Or Pudge. Neither of them had ever developed lower leg movements that good. He frowned deeply. Alan? Had it been Alan all along? Of course, the red ski cap—

Without further thought, Harlow went over the side. It was an easy run, high but not steep, not long enough to make him winded. Halfway down he ran into snow; large, wet flakes, drifting straight down. When he reached the next ridge, he was immediately aware that it was becoming noticeably colder. He glided into a brace of sapling pines and moved under their umbrella boughs to rest.

But he did not rest long. Above him, still moving swiftly toward him, was Leo. Or rather, Alan.

Harlow pushed off the ridge onto the next run. It was longer than the second one, but still not as long as the first. As he plunged downward, he became aware that the sun was completely blocked out now, with only the gray daylight left; and the falling snow was thickening around him like a white curtain. Halfway down the run, the snow became so heavy that for most of a minute he was actually skiing blind. He had never done that before; it gave him an eerie feeling.

He was in a half-crouch, leaning to his right, when he hit the tree. It caught him between the shoulder and elbow, and spun him all the way around, knocking him flat. There was a sharp *craaaaack!* sound and for a terrible, frightening moment he was afraid one of his skis had

broken. Ignoring his throbbing arm, he pushed himself erect and threw his goggles up to examine the skis. They were both all right. He swallowed dryly; thank God.

He looked around. He was on a level ridge trail that wound through a thick stand of ponderosas, very tall ponderosas, close to fifty feet, he estimated. Blocked by the high branches, the snow was not falling as heavily where he stood. It was as if he were in a huge, silent tent, absolutely white except for the poker-straight trees that held up its roof. His eyes were watering. Pulling off one mitten, he wiped them with his fingers. As he put the mitten back on, he saw the red ski cap again.

It was coming toward him through the trees, a slowly moving spot of color in a sea of pure white. He sucked in his breath. Alan? Pudge? Leo? Who the hell was it? But, he thought, it made no difference who it was. No difference at all. He had to escape from whoever it was. He had to run . . .

He looked down at the ground. The falling snow, even as light as it was in the trees, had already covered up his tracks and his ski poles, which were still on the ground. If he moved now, he would make fresh tracks and could be followed. But if he

stayed where he was, if he hid . . .

Next to where Harlow stood, there was a twelve-foot drift banked up against a tall ponderosa. He unlocked his skis and knelt beside the drift. He tried to dig with both hands but his right arm was too sore to move it, so he used his left hand only, scooping out a cave in the drift. When he had dug it large enough to squeeze into, he turned and sat back in it, knees drawn up in front of him. He glanced at his skis; they were almost covered with fresh snow. And the newly falling flakes were beginning to cover him also, camouflaging him in his cave.

Squinting, Harlow searched for the red ski cap. He saw it: off to the left at about ten o'clock, some fifteen yards away. It was impossible, because of the falling snow, to see any more of the figure; just the bright red cap. With maddening slowness, it moved across in front of him. Ten o'clock, twelve o'clock, two o'clock. Then it disappeared into the whiteness. Harlow chuckled to himself. Fool.

His right arm was throbbing and he carefully touched it. Through the ski jacket he could feel massive swelling. So that was what the cracking sound had been: his arm.

He blinked his eyelids, which were becoming heavy with snow.

He wanted to get up and get back on his skis, but somehow he could not manage it. With his left hand he reached out of the cave and stuck his mitten-fingers into the fresh layer of snow. There were about three inches of it, which meant it was falling at the rate of nine or ten inches an hour. That discovery, and the sensation that he was growing very warm, made him realize suddenly that he had to get out; he had to have help.

"Alan!" he yelled.

No answer.

"Pudge!"

No answer.

"Leo!"

No answer.

He called their names over and over for half an hour.

Then the white world became silent again.

In the coffee shop at the lodge, Collins, the mountain ranger, tossed his red ski cap on the counter and warmed his hands around a mug of steaming chocolate.

"Anything from the highway crew?" Boles asked him.

"Nothing," Collins replied. "He didn't make it down, I'm afraid." He sighed heavily. "Damn! I came so close to catching him. You know, I thought it was my imagination when I first saw the guy. In all the years I've been coming down from the

lookout cabin on those back slopes, that's the first time I ever saw another skier. Was he the only one up there today?"

"No, that fellow at the front table went up, too. Only to the second ridge, though. He had intended going all the way to the summit but he hadn't been on skis for a while. After giving it some thought, he came on down the two lower runs."

"Smart," said Collins. He glanced at the man, at the ordinary red ski cap similar to his own lying next to the man's plate. "Who is he, anyway?"

The lodge manager shrugged. "Just a salesman. Name's Phil Casey. Car threw a rod. It's laid up in Hickey's Garage; he sent to Sacramento for a part. Said he thought as long as he was stranded, he might as well get in a little skiing. Only got to do the one downhill run, though, before the storm hit. Tough luck."

"Better luck than the other fellow had," Collins commented.

He wondered if the other skier had frozen to death yet, and sipped at his steaming chocolate.

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# An Honest Man's Legal Justice

by Donald Honig

**T**here aren't many men left in Capstone today who remember Ned Turner, who lived in what he used to call the soldier's shack down at the end of the old trolley run near the Baker Avenue cemetery. It wasn't hardly a cemetery yet, in those years when old Ned was living there. The cemetery was just begun then; there wasn't even a fence around it yet; you could stand on the hill and count the tombstones and not miss a one. That was where Ned had his chicken farm, with the big tin sign out in front that read FAMILY SIZED EGGS - GOOD PRICES. Ned would always be sitting in front of the shack on a tin can, puffing on a corncob, wearing an old blue forage cap that was ex-Union Army property. The chicken farm and the shack too are all gone today because the cemetery naturally expanded with Capstone and there's nothing left of the place that Ned knew.

The reason some of the old men still remember Ned and still talk about him is because he was the only man in Capstone who fought on the Confederate side in the Civil War. Nobody ever erected any monuments to Ned's distinction, of course, but neither was there very much criticism of Ned for taking off to join the Confederates like that because everybody knew the story in those days and most people even wished him luck. Some people say that Ned was probably the only man in the whole of New York State to fight on the other side in that war, and that might be true and it might not.

Ned wasn't a traitor or even a Southern sympathizer or anything like that. He had his reason. He believed in doing what he believed in doing, and that was what he believed was right. He figured that setting his own sense of justice to work was just as important as anything else in the world. The whole thing was a matter of a man believing in the legal way to do things, believing that that was the only way to get complete and honest justice, believing that if you kept faith in the right it would just have to come about . . . and not only believing in all that but going to a good deal of trouble to adhere to his beliefs.

The whole cause of it was the chicken farm—that, and a deck

of dishonest cards and a neighborhood shyster named Pete Mason. Ned lived in Capstone, on that old chicken farm of his, all his long life, except for his time in the army and the time Pete Mason took it away from him.

I suppose there were bigger card games in Capstone than that one, but there never was a more famous one. They played it one snowy night in the old Capstone Hotel that was a stopover, or station, as the oldtimers used to call it, for the Long Island farmers and that was such an old place that they said that President George Washington once stopped over there for a night. The old hotel went back to Mother Earth in one of the town's best fires, in the nineties. The old buggers said that that ancient place just got so tired of standing up that it started the fire itself just to get out of its misery. Anyhow, that was where Ned Turner and Pete Mason turned cards that night. Pete Mason had the reputation of being the lowest, meanest man in the neighborhood. He was a drinker, a cheat, a sneak thief, and everything else that would put a man next to a noose but never quite into one. He was eventually run out of town by an irate husband, but that's got nothing to do with Ned Turner and his story.

The card game—it was draw poker—became more and more involved as the evening wore on. There was five foot of snow fallen outside so there was no place to go and no way of getting there anyway, so the boys sat at poker all night. It came down to Ned Turner sitting with empty pockets. Pete asked him if he wanted to put the deed to his chicken farm into the game. Ned had been drinking a good deal of ale by this time (they said that Pete had stood unusually sober the whole time), and so it didn't take much to persuade him to be doing something that he wouldn't ordinarily be at.

"I reckon my luck can't keep traveling in a straight line all night," Ned said.

"That's right," Pete said. "Every road has got to have its bend."

So Ned was betting against the deed to his farm. The boys said that they never saw so much bad luck come steady to a fellow at cards. Ned kept going down time after time until he had lost everything, chicken farm and all. He just shook his head and looked toward the window.

"She still coming down?" he asked.

"Won't stop till July," somebody said.

"All right," Ned said. "Soon's I get through I'll clear out my gear

and you can take her over. Don't forget to sing songs to them chicks in the mornings," he said to Pete, "if you want 'em to keep layin'."

So a few days later Pete Mason took over the farm and Ned went down to Newtown Creek where he got a job on a barge there. They say it was somebody on the barge who was a friend of Pete Mason's and who didn't know Ned that told him the story of Pete's winning a chicken farm from a fellow who couldn't tell the difference between a crooked and a honest deck of cards.

"Is that the truth?" Ned said innocently, taking a pull on his pipe.

"That Pete Mason's a sly one," the fellow said.

Ned walked up from the creek that night and busted in on Pete and demanded to know the truth of this thing. Pete got all flustered in the face and grabbed his rifle and told Ned to get off his property—which answered Ned's question about the cards being dishonest.

You can imagine how sore everybody in town was when they heard. Some of Ned's friends were of a mind to go down to the farm with pistols, but Ned held them back.

"It wouldn't be legal," Ned said. That was Ned for you right there—everything had to be done legal or not at all; even if Pete Mason had taken him over by fraud, Ned wasn't going to get redress by any but honest legal means, not that he wasn't sore enough to chew bumblebees. "The farm belongs to Pete," he would say, "but Pete belongs to me." That deed was a bona fide legal document and Pete Mason owned it and that was that. But Ned wasn't going to let it rest that easy, everybody knew.

Ned went back to the barge and kept working, steady and patient. "My turn'll come," he said. His friends kept pumping him up to take out and shoot Pete Mason for what he had done.

"That's not the law, boys," Ned would tell them.

"There's a higher law," one of his friends said, "which corrects the shortcomings which written law is hog-tied to do, and that's the law you ought to invoke right now."

"Yes, that's true, boys," Ned said. "But there is even a higher law than yours, which spoke to men when they was writing them there laws which you claim are hog-tied and allow a man to take another's property by fraud, and that higher law than all says that someday soon I'm going to get back my farm and still have my conscience too, having not broken any law, neither legal, moral, nor Biblical, because the existence of right has been proved and

justice shall prevail the same as it has endured," Ned told them, all of which was his personal code taught him by his father who had never stole, lied, nor cheated.

"If people knewed you were that straight," they told Ned, "they'd of run you for mayor."

"I'm just a farmer," Ned said.

But like Ned knew, something reared up and gave him his opportunity. Ned looked at the whole thing from his personal point of view, as though this conflict between the States which was going to shake the continent till every grassblade quivered and every rock and stone was moved from one place to another was some kind of intercession of fate's which had interceded especially for him, to give him a chance to enact his own kind of honest legal justice. The war broke out that spring and Ned heard that Pete Mason had joined up with the -th New York regiment. Pete had got drunk and stole a horse and buggy and drove it down Billy Goat Hill and wrecked it at the bottom, killed the horse and all, and when he heard that the law was after him he figured he'd get out of it by joining up.

Ned thought it over and came to the conclusion that in war it was legal to kill a man, but that it looked like he'd have to join the other side to do it. So he made up his mind and lit out by horse for Richmond and joined up with a Virginia bunch. He promised himself that he'd never shoot at no Union soldier but Pete Mason. His Southern buddies laughed when they heard his story, telling him that there was maybe a hundred thousand men in the Army of the Potomac, but Ned said that that didn't matter as he knew Pete Mason's face and would pick him out of a hundred thousand. Another Reb lad asked him what he'd do when the Unions commenced shooting at them:

"I got my beliefs," Pete said, "and they'll take care of that problem when it arises."

Most of his Southern fellow soldiers put Ned off as either a fugitive or a lunatic, but he wasn't going to shoot at anybody but Pete Mason and that was that. As it turned out they put him in a commissary outfit and he didn't see as much fighting as he might have.

Well, Antietam came and went and so did Fredericksburg and Gettysburg and a lot of other places that you can look up in the books. Ned saw hard times. They whistled some bullets at him, but none ever touched and he kept his pledge and never fired but that

he was aiming at a tree or some clouds. When his commissary outfit was blown to kingdom come by shells at Gettysburg and he never got a scratch, he knew he had right on his side.

There was three years gone, and they were in Virginia someplace when they pulled in some prisoners from the Union and Ned and his boys were giving them a feed before taking them away when he heard that the -th New York was right on the other side of the river.

"Any of you boys ever heard of Pete Mason?" Ned asked.

"There's a Pete Mason in a tent near ourn," one of the prisoners said.

"Where's he from?" Ned asked.

"I don't know," the prisoner said. "All I know is that he's the captain of the card table."

"That's the boy," Ned said.

Ned knew that this was his chance, that all his patience was going to see its reward and that legal justice was at last going to be served. When it got good and dark that night, he took off from camp and tiptoed through the pickets and swam the river. He got through the Union pickets without any trouble and began going through the forest looking for the -th New York and Pete Mason in particular, just walking blind, knowing that fate was on his side, just like a man believing in the stars or something like that, absolutely no doubt in his mind that he'd catch up to Pete Mason now.

It was very dark. The forest was thick and twisted, like a place of brooding hobgoblins. Ned went through it like a native possum. He could see Union campfires up ahead through the trees. Then he passed a couple of fellows who only listened to his New York voice and never noticed his Confederate duds in the dark, and he asked them whereabouts was the -th New York and they waved him over to another part of the woods. He was going over that way when he saw this fellow coming through the trees. The fellow didn't look like a soldier—that is, he didn't walk like a soldier—but he had to be one and Ned knew that only Pete Mason could be a soldier and not look that much like one. So he threw down his rifle on him and said,

"Stop right there, soldier." The soldier was alarmed and stood right there, still as a tree. Ned came through the trees, his rifle pointed businesslike right on him. The soldier was scared froze, like only a man with a whispering conscience can be in the dark.



THE SOLDIER WAS SCARED FROZE LIKE ONLY A MAN WITH A WHISPERING CONSCIENCE CAN BE IN THE DARK.

**ALFRED HITCHCOCK**  
mystery magazine Nov. 1992

"Pete Mason," Ned said, stepping up to the soldier, who was looking at him real careful and curious.

"Why, Ned Turner," Pete said. "What are you doing in that getup?"

"Don't you even move to breathe," Ned said, holding his rifle right on him. "I reckon I'm going to get hunk for that card game right now."

"Hey, hey, Ned," Pete said, "you ain't going to do that to me."

"I reckon this here difference in the color of our suits makes it all same and legal," Ned said. "Now don't you try and sweet-talk me out of it neither. I've gone through smoke and hardtack and grapeshot to get to this moment."

"I wouldn't try to sweet-talk you out of nothing, Ned," Pete said, but all the while his mind was burning emergency fuel. Ned picked the gun up to his shoulder and would have done the job right then when Pete said in a right nervous hurry, "Hold back a minute, Ned. You can't do this to me. It's agin the rules of civilized warfare. I'm your prisoner, man. It's agin the rules to do up your prisoner, no matter what personal feelings are in it."

That Pete Mason, he was shrewd all right. Damn if he didn't have Ned stumped again, damn if poor Ned wasn't hamstrung by laws again. Ned was so mad he could've punched over trees with his fist. But he didn't let on. He was doing some thinking himself.

"It all goes down the pipe in war," he said. "Rules don't make sense nowadays, so I reckon I can let you have it and still put my conscience on the pillow tonight."

That really got Pete het up. "I ain't armed," he said.

"All the better," Ned said, "and thank you for the tip." He brought the rifle up again and aimed it straight between Pete's eyes.

"Gawd, Ned," Pete said, "you can't do it."

"Well," Ned said, "I reckon there's one way you can save your hide, but I don't think you'd want to own up to doing it."

"You just name it, Ned," Pete said.

"I shouldn't even be thinking this because it'll cost me my honor as a soldier."

"Anything, Ned," Pete said.

"Well," Ned said, "you just write down on paper that you defrauded Ned Turner out of his farm by means of a dishonest deck of cards, and put your name on it."

Pete Mason was only too glad. He did it quicker than you can sneeze.

"All right, Pete," Ned said. "You get along now and I'll see you back in Capstone." Pete took the opportunity and blewed out of there right quick and Ned went after him, only Pete didn't know it. Ned hit onto a farmhouse soon and, seeing his Rebel duds, the people there welcomed him like a messiah. He gave them a good story, got a farmer's outfit, stuck a piece of straw between his teeth, and lit out back for home. Once he got past the troop lines he had no trouble. He figured he'd won his own war, and anyway, the way things were going there wasn't going to be no Confederate government to give him comeuppance.

So Ned came back to Capstone, chased Pete's flunkies off the chicken farm, and picked up his work again. There really wasn't much hard feelings against him in town because everybody knew the purpose of his joining the other side and got a loud guffaw out of the way he had throwed down on Pete Mason in the woods and made him admit the fraud.

But then the war was over and home came Pete Mason, looking to get the farm back. He admitted the whole story of Ned's nabbing him in the woods, admitted he signed the paper, but said he had done it only to save his life and that what Ned had made him write about fraud and dishonest cards was not true. When he went down to the farm, Ned was there with a rifle and told him to stay off.

But Pete went up and down Capstone telling everybody that he had been robbed of his lawful property and making such a fuss about it that Ned finally said he would be willing to go to a court of law and once and for all see who owned the farm. Pete said all right. Pete was probably figuring on Ned's being branded a traitor and all that because he certainly was the last man in the world to want to stand up in a court of law and look the eagle in the eye.

So they went up to Judge Stetterson, who had just then built the big white house on Grant Avenue which that young Dr. Nelson has just now bought. The judge was at that time known as the most honest man in the whole of Queens County. Ned knew he'd get mighty fine legal jurisprudence from him.

The judge convened a court in Bumper Clark's blacksmith shop. Pete went first to plead his case, telling his side of the story. The judge just sat there looking stern and fierce, and how Pete Mason could have ever told a lie to that face was beyond anybody. But Pete did. Then Ned rose up and swore on the Bible and told his end of the story, right from the beginning, through the whole war, right up to that moment, explaining why he did everything he did.

Well, it took the judge only about two deep breaths before he came out with his decision. He told it straight to Pete Mason:

"Do you mean to stand here," he said to Pete, "and say that a man who would undertake the hazard of leaving his home to enlist in a strange army and voluntarily endure the dangers and privations of warfare just to extract what he believed in his heart was just revenge, and then when he had it in his grasp let his code of honor forbid him from executing it, would come to this court and here this day in front of his neighbors tell such an elaborate lie? This court rules unequivocally that the farm in dispute was obtained by Pete Mason via fraud and therefore is the legal property of Ned Turner. Court dismissed," said the judge.

"So I got my farm back for keeps," was the way old Ned used to wind it up whenever folks came down and asked him about the story of how he happened to fight in the Confederate army, "and believe me if I live to be a hundred and people come around wanting to know how I stood it so long, I'll just tell them that I always had a unguilty conscience and a serene feeling in all wrongs being rectified in whatever due time and trouble it might take, just the way the sun is always pressin' to get through dark clouds and always makes it. That's what I'd tell them. Now get on and leave an old man be."

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# The Conjuror

by W. Sherwood Hartman

**T**he man stood hesitantly as he read and reread the lettering on the door: DAN MARTIN, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATOR. He glanced behind him. The corridor was empty. He tapped the door with timid knuckles and a firm voice told him to enter.

Dan rose from his desk and surveyed the visitor. He was in his early forties, gray at the temples, and with the beginnings of a comfortable paunch. He was also scared stiff. Dan catalogued him quickly as typical suburbia, member of the country club, in the insurance business, officer in a service club, one jump ahead of the mortgage.

Dan shook the nervously damp hand that was extended.

The man's voice was almost treble with strain. "I'm Max Alvis."

"Sit down," Dan said, leaning back in his swivel chair.

Max perched on the edge of his chair as though he expected a surge of high voltage to pass through it at any moment. "I'm in trouble, I think. No, I know I'm in trouble, but I don't know how bad."

"What's your problem?"

Max glanced at the door as though seeking escape, then, deciding there was none, started talking rapidly. "You have to understand, it would never have happened if I hadn't been drinking. Normally, I'm a good family man. I'll admit my foot may have slipped on occasion, but I have a lovely wife and I'm a good family man."

Dan listened to the protest of innocence and decided that Max Alvis would cheat with his best friend's wife if he thought he could get away with it. He listened quietly as Max raced through his tale of misadventure. When he finished, Dan asked, "How much did she get you for?"

"Twenty-five thousand bucks."

Dan's reaction was a long, low whistle.

"I had to borrow the money, and I can't afford it, but I was scared—I'm still damned scared. If that guy's dead, I'm in real trouble, regardless of the money."

"He's not dead," Dan laughed sympathetically. "You have been conned, my friend, very neatly, with one of the oldest confidence games in the business. Let's go

over it again. You meet the girl in a bar. She gets real friendly, and you both get more than a little drunk, at least she pretends to be. Then you take her to her apartment, things get real cosy, and in walks another man. She screams, and he pulls her to her feet and starts slapping her around. Then he's suddenly on the floor with a knife in his belly and blood all over his shirt. She's hysterical, and you both get out of there.

"Then comes the clincher. She needs money to get out of town. You have to help her. She reminds you that you are involved just as much as she is. She even hints that it might have been you that had the knife. You're scared, and so you pay."

"Then you watch the papers. Three, four days go by, and there's nothing about a murder. You start to wonder. Then you come to me. Why not the police?"

"Because I thought he was dead." Max tried to light a cigarette, but his fingers weren't up to the job. He broke it in half and dropped it in the ashtray. "He has to be dead. The knife handle was sticking out between his fingers and there was blood all over him."

Dan snorted. "That was nothing but pure catsup. The knife was one of those trick jobs with a retractable blade that you can

pick up in any magic shop. They look deadly, but the point's dull and the blade slides back up into the handle. That guy was washing up and changing his shirt before you were even out of the building."

"Then he's not dead?" Max was still dubious, but the sound of relief was in his voice.

"Not unless he got hit by a bus or something."

"That dirty witch!"

"So, you've been taken. You can go to the police, but I'm afraid it won't do you much good. They've got your dough, and the police certainly can't get it back for you. Even if you can find them, what proof do you have about your story? It's your word against theirs. I'm sorry, my friend, but you've been had."

"That dirty witch," Max repeated. His face reddened as anger replaced fear. He sat seething, drumming his fingers on the edge of Dan's desk. "Get my money back. I don't care how you do it, just get my money back."

"How do you expect me to do that? I have nothing to go on. I don't know who they were. I know nothing, and even if I did, how would I go about getting your money back?"

"Figure something out," Max pleaded. "If you can get it back, we'll split. If I lose it all, I'm dead, but with half of it, I can

manage. Try something, anything . . . There's half of twenty-five thousand bucks in it for you."

Now Dan was thoughtful. "Okay, we'll try. What did she look like?"

"She was in her middle twenties, well stacked, blonde . . ."

"Real or dyed?"

Max hesitated. "Dyed."

"Anything unusual? Something different that would help me spot her?"

Max closed his eyes, trying to visualize her. "She wore two rings on one finger, but she wore them on her right hand. I remember that because it seemed awkward, and she had a small mole on her breast."

"Oh, that's a great help."

"No, I mean you could see it. She wore a lowcut dress and you could see the mole."

"It could have been painted on. Women do that—you know, paint on a beauty mark."

"No. It didn't rub off."

Dan smiled an evil grin.

Max bristled. "Look, mister, this may be funny to you, but there's no humor in it as far as I'm concerned."

"Sorry," Dan grunted. "How about the guy? What did he look like?"

"About thirty, dark hair—there was something funny about him—yeah, I remember. The tip of his ear was missing.

Funny how that sticks in my mind. As scared as I was, I can remember that. It was his left ear, I think. That was it, his left ear. It looked like the lobe of his ear had been cut off."

"That could be a lead," Dan commented. "Give me your card and I'll contact you, but don't expect miracles. I have little to go on, but I'll see what I can find out."

They shook hands and Max left. Dan dialed police headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Anderson. After a short wait, the lieutenant was on the line.

"Andy, this is Dan Martin."

"Yeah, Dan. What can I do for you?"

"Do you have anything in your files on a guy with a chunk of his left ear missing? He's in his early thirties, has dark hair."

"That's all?"

"That's all I have to go on."

"Okay. I'll run it through R and I and call you back in about twenty minutes." The lieutenant hung up.

Dan opened the bottom drawer of the file cabinet and took out a fifth of scotch. He poured three fingers into a paper cup and added an equal amount of water from the cooler. Then he sat back and relaxed as he waited for Andy to call back. He was halfway through the second scotch and water when the phone rang.

"I have a make on him, Dan. The name's Leo Privet. Six arrests on morals charges, but only one conviction. He served six months four years ago, but we have nothing on him since. He lives in Valley Stream, out on the island. No visible means of support. Has a small home there, but no wife. However, he does have a blonde housekeeper who's a knockout. This is a shady cat, Dan. What do you have on him? I'm curious."

"I don't know, Andy. Give me a couple of days to case the thing."

"Look, buddy, you must have something or you wouldn't have called me."

"I don't have a thing except a client. I don't even have a hunch. Do you have this Leo's address?"

"Yeah, 133 Aldon Street. That's a nice neighborhood, so take it easy."

"I'll be careful. And listen, Andy, if I latch onto anything you can use, I'll let you know right away."

Dan hung up and glanced at his watch. It was five thirty. He finished his drink, threw the empty paper cup in the wastebasket, and headed for the door, carefully locking it behind him. He entered the elevator and pressed the button that took him to the underground parking lot. The attendant brought his four-year-old sedan from the

maze of cars and he slid under the wheel, dreading the ordeal that was to follow.

The car climbed smoothly up the ramp from the cool basement, and as Dan reached the street the searing heat blasted him. He inched his way with the crosstown traffic and finally reached the bridge. It wasn't too bad after he was on the parkway. The air was cooler and he almost enjoyed the drive. There was still an hour of daylight left when he reached the turnoff to Valley Stream. He swung off the main highway and became entangled with the local evening traffic, but only until he found a bar. Then he parked and went in to rinse the city from his mouth with a cold beer.

It was nearly nine when he left, and it was much cooler. He checked a town map at a nearby gas station and located Aldon Street. It was only two blocks from the bar. He cruised around the block then parked three houses from 133 on the opposite side of the street. The evening was beginning to darken. He lit a cigarette and waited.

The blonde came out first. Dan didn't get a good look at her face, but her figure was a rare fascination. There was a brief flash of thigh as she swung into the seat of the sports car that was parked in the driveway, a

quick snarl of the motor, and she was gone. Dan continued to wait.

Another half hour passed, then the garage door opened and a new convertible slid down the driveway, backed around, and smoothly took off past Dan. He couldn't see the driver's ear, but his hair was dark.

Dan reached into the glove compartment and took out a pencil flashlight, a strip of celluloid, and a pair of thin cotton gloves. Then he left the car and ambled across the street with studied nonchalance. When he reached the hedge at 133, he ducked into its shadow and quickly made his way to the rear of the house. He put the gloves on then, and the strip of celluloid opened the spring lock on the back door with ease. Guiding himself with sparing flashes of light, he searched until he found what he was certain would be there, a small, neat wall safe in the study, unimaginatively hidden behind a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa*. He left everything undisturbed and drove back to Manhattan.

Dan called Max Alvis the next morning. They met at ten thirty in a downtown sporting goods store where Dan led Max to a large display of knives. "Pick out the one that looks most like the one she used," he said.

Max studied for a moment,

then pointed. "That one is similar."

Dan called a clerk and bought the knife. When they reached the sidewalk, Max asked, "You find out anything?"

"A little," Dan smiled. "Just be patient. Excuse me now, I have some more shopping to do."

The next two weeks were busy ones for Dan. He alternated following the blonde and Leo. Finally a pattern appeared. The blonde would leave around nine in the evening, drive to the station, and take the subway to the city. She would stake out in one of the bars on 57th Street and look for a mark. Leo would leave about a half hour later and drive to the city. He would hover in the background and watch the progress the blonde was making. They made one hit the second week, and Dan followed it with interest.

He had to admit it was a smooth operation. The blonde played it real cool the first night. She and the mark became acquainted and had several drinks and a long conversation. Leo passed by for a visual check. When the blonde left, she left alone. She met the mark the following night. That gave Leo the whole day to check the mark's financial and marital status. When she left the second night, the mark was with her, and Dan was an inconspicuous tail. He

followed them to a nearby apartment house and waited in a doorway across the street. Leo showed up thirty minutes later, smoked a cigarette, then went upstairs. Ten minutes later the blonde and the mark hurried out of the building and into the mark's car. They sped off into the night. Dan still waited. Twenty minutes later, Leo followed at a leisurely pace and headed back towards the island.

Dan studied their timetable until their every move was predictable. Then he made his move.

The first step was to establish an identity. He bought a copy of the *Times* and went down the list of buyers that were in town for the various manufacturers' showings, stopping at the name of Fred Hanson, Jr., representing Hanson's Furniture, Des Moines, Iowa. A check of the Dun and Bradstreet report showed the company to have a triple A rating. Dan decided to borrow the name of Fred Hanson for the next few days.

He went to the blonde's favorite bar that evening, purposely arriving early while business was slow, and engaged the bartender in conversation. He dropped the name of Hanson's Furniture several times, along with a very broad hint that he wouldn't be adverse to some pleasant female companionship. He was on his third martini

when the blonde arrived. She sat several stools away from him and he feigned uninterest as the bartender moved away to wait on her, but he watched them in the bar mirror. There was a rapid, muted conversation, then a nod from the bartender in his direction.

A little later, while the bartender was busy rinsing glasses, the blonde held an unlit cigarette and looked helplessly toward Dan. He stepped around the stools that separated them and, flicking his lighter, offered the flame to her. As she leaned toward the light, he saw the birthmark Alvis had described.

"Waiting for someone?" he asked.

"No. Just having a quiet drink." She looked at him with candid directness. "It's lonely in the city sometimes."

"I know. I'm a stranger here myself," Dan said. Then he asked in a hesitant voice, "Could I buy you a drink?"

"That would be nice."

Dan moved his drink next to hers and ordered another for them both. "I'm Fred," he said for openers.

"I'm Dolly. You going to be in the city long?"

"Just for a few days. I'll be going back to Des Moines after the show."

"The show?"

"Well, actually it's a market.

The furniture manufacturers display their new lines twice a year, and we retailers pick out the things we figure will move, and then place our orders."

"You own a furniture store?"

Dan nodded. "Hanson's, in Des Moines. It's a pretty big operation. Dad started the business, but he's retired now. I have to carry the whole load."

"Gee, that's interesting. Where do they have this show?"

"At the Astor. It takes up the whole fifth floor."

The basic information had been delivered. Dan ad libbed from there on, dividing his attention between Dolly's mole and the mirror. He finally spotted the nicked ear. Leo Privet had arrived. Dolly gave no sign of recognition. Leo had one drink, looked Dan over carefully and left. Dan's conversation with Dolly continued for about fifteen minutes, then he looked at his watch.

"Where did this evening go? I'll have to be leaving. Nine o'clock comes awfully early. It's been nice talking to you, Dolly. I wish we could do it more often."

"I've enjoyed meeting you, too."

Dan hesitated with deliberate shyness, then he made the pitch. "Look, tomorrow's the last day of the show, but there's no reason I couldn't stay over. We could have dinner together and

a few drinks. Or am I being presumptuous?"

"Not at all. I'd love to have dinner with you, but what would your wife say if she knew about this?"

Dan pondered that for a moment, then he grinned. "I won't tell if you don't."

Dolly giggled. "Okay, it's a date. What time?"

"Eight o'clock suit you?"

"That'll be fine. Here?"

"I can't think of a better place."

"I'll look forward to seeing you then."

She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and, after one final glance at her mole, he left.

At nine-fifteen the next morning, Dan strolled into the lobby of the Astor, neatly dressed in a charcoal brown business suit and carrying a briefcase. He paused to buy a pack of cigarettes and glanced around the lobby. Leo was seated across the room, seemingly engrossed in the morning paper. Dan pressed the elevator button that took him to the fifth floor, walked down the corridor, then came back down by the stairway. When he returned to the lobby, Leo was gone. Dan grunted admiration of Leo's thoroughness.

He drove out to Valley Stream that afternoon and left the car at the parking lot at the station. Then he took the next train back to the city. It took twenty min-

utes longer to drive out than it did to come back. Dan figured that would be the extra margin of time that he needed.

Regardless of all the preparation, Dan was apprehensive as he waited for Dolly to show for their date. When she walked through the door, he exhaled and the tension left him.

After two martinis, Dan asked, "Where to for dinner?"

"There's a little Italian place near here. It's not real fancy, but the veal parmesan is delicious. You like Italian food?"

"It sounds wonderful to me. Shall I call a cab?"

"We can walk. It isn't far."

It was a quiet restaurant. Candlelight flickered across the red and white checked tablecloths, and subdued music filled the room. The food was excellent. They had a bottle of wine with dinner, then they danced. Holding her, her lush softness tantalizingly firm against him, made Dan wish that there could be another ending to the evening, something completely different from the one he had planned. But the hard facts remained. She was a phony. She and Leo had taken Max Alvis, and who knows how many more, on the same kind of bunco for which Dan had set himself up. He held her a little closer as they danced, aware that he was to be taken, just like the others.

He was just another mark as far as she was concerned. The realization cleared his mind, and he could proceed with his plan with a clear conscience.

Three drinks later, she put her hand on his knee and leaned toward him. A soft fuzziness had crept into her voice. "You're very sweet, you know. I like you." Her head was tilted and her lips were temptingly close, eyes inviting.

"You're sweet too," Dan replied, then he kissed her.

"Mmmmm," she cooed, "that was good, but people are watching. Let's go somewhere else."

"Where would you like to go?"

"We could have a drink at my place. It isn't very far from here."

"That's a wonderful idea," Dan said. He got off his stool with studied unsteadiness. Dolly took his arm and they stepped into the warm night.

"Shall we take a cab?"

"Silly," she giggled, "it's just around the corner."

She clung to his arm as they walked, and her warmth pressed against him. He followed her up the stairs, admiring the view so much that he was sorry there wasn't another flight. She pretended to unlock the already unlocked door, and they went in.

It was an ordinary furnished apartment. The folding bed was open and made, with the covers turned down in invitation. Dolly

fixed them a drink, then kicked off her shoes as they sat on the edge of the bed drinking it. Then she excused herself and went to the bathroom.

Dan moved quickly. He slid his hands under both pillows and found nothing. Then he turned up the corner of the mattress and saw the trick knife hidden there. He replaced it with the one in his pocket and waited. When Dolly came out of the bathroom, she reached for him.

"Be nice to me," she sighed, and Dan hoped that Leo would be a little late. He was gasping for breath when he heard a key turn in the lock and Leo entered.

Dan watched the action that followed with admiration. The acting was hammy, but effective. Leo pulled Dolly to her feet and slapped her hard. They struggled for a moment, then Leo gasped and sank to his knees, a red circle surrounding the knife handle he was clasping at his stomach. Then he fell forward and lay still.

Dolly was sobbing, "Oh, what did I do? We have to get away from here. Hurry!"

Dan hurried, and then ran down the stairs to the sidewalk. Then he took over with positive masculine protectiveness.

"This way, but don't run. Act natural," he commanded as he herded her toward the subway

entrance. They caught the first train and rode to the next stop. Dolly was sobbing. "We get off here," Dan said. "Take hold of yourself." He took her arm and steered her through the short tunnel to where the Long Island express came through. Dolly continued her erratic sobbing even after they were on the train to the Island. She sensed that the play was somehow being taken out of her hands, but she had to make her pitch.

"I've got to get away. I killed him, I know I killed him. I'll have to have money," she gasped a begging sob. "You can help me, can't you? You *have* to help me!"

Dan's answer was a harshly blunt, "Why?"

That corked her sobbing and sugary vitriol couched her next line. "You were there with me, weren't you? It's your fault as much as mine."

"Is it?"

"And how about your wife? What would she say?"

Dan pretended to be in deep thought. "How much would it take for you to get away?"

"At least twenty-five thousand."

Dan hissed a soft whistle through his teeth. "You mean that's all you'd need?"

"It doesn't matter where I go, but I'll need new clothes, a car,

everything. I can't just start out again with nothing."

"That sounds reasonable enough from your point of view, but I had something else in mind," Dan chuckled. "I was thinking of a figure in the vicinity of fifty thousand, but on *my* side of the ledger."

"You're insane," she hissed. "I can tell the police it was you who had the knife. You can fry for this."

"No, dearie," Dan laughed, "your fingerprints are on that knife, not mine." He took the knife out of his pocket that he had taken from under the mattress. "Do you recognize this?" He pressed a button on the side and the blade slid out with a nasty snick. Then he pushed the point of the blade against his palm and it slid smoothly back into the handle. "I switched the knives, baby. You cut Leo real good. It's no game this time. This is for keeps."

Her face was ashen beneath the blonde hair. "You're lying, you've got to be lying."

The train was stopping at Valley Stream. Dan took her arm and she was like a sleep-walker as he led her to his parked car. "Name it," he snapped. "Either we go to the police or to 133 Aldon Street. It's your baby, and my price is fifty thousand. Tonight."

"I don't have it." She was sobbing in earnest now.

"You know where to find it."

"Leo would kill me."

"You're forgetting that Leo's dead. You killed him. Which way will it be?"

She got into the car. "Okay, you'll get your dirty money, you—you Judas."

She trembled all the way to 133 Aldon Street. Dan didn't know if it was from fear or anger, and he didn't much care. She unlocked the front door and he followed her to the den. He pulled the picture away from the safe and demanded, "Open it. Make it fast."

There was fifty-three thousand in the safe. Dan counted out three thousand and gave it to Dolly. Then he unzipped one of the sofa cushions, took out the foam filler, and stuffed the balance of the money in the makeshift sack. "Let's go," he snapped.

"But my things!" she protested. "I'll need time to pack."

"You don't have time to pack. Your clothes won't mean a thing if the police get here before we're gone."

They left quickly and Dan drove her back to Manhattan. After he crossed the bridge, he swung south and took her to Grand Central Station. He locked the money-stuffed cushion cover in the car trunk, then took her to the ticket window. She bought

a one-way ticket to Chicago, and he waited until she was aboard and the train was gone before driving back to his office. It was four thirty in the morning.

He locked the office door behind him and stacked the fifty thousand in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. Then he poured a stiff shot of scotch into a paper cup, tilted back in his chair, propped his feet on the desk, and surveyed the shine on his shoes. It had been a profitable venture. He'd call Max Alvis in the morning and give him his twelve thousand five hundred, and still have three-fourths of the fifty grand for himself.

He sipped a toast to Leo. Poor Leo . . . He'd be home by now, pacing the floor, wondering what happened to Dolly and all his money. He'd never know.

Then Dan gave a silent toast to Dolly. It had been a rotten thing to do, making her think he had substituted a real knife for Leo's trick one. The real knife that Max had seen him buy was in the desk drawer. He had used it only to have a pattern to go by when he bought another trick knife to replace Leo's. She'd never know that, either.

Dan dropped the empty paper cup in the wastebasket, folded his arms on the desk to cradle his head, and went to sleep.

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# The Man on the Stair

## by Bryce Walton

**R**ichard Brocia III squirmed with fury on the couch, kicked his stumpy legs, pounded a chubby fist against the wall, and continued his familiar chant.

"—and then I'll kill him. I'll kill him. I'll kill him . . ."

The doctor curled deeper into his chair behind the head of the couch. He was touching his thinning gray hair, then his thin face, finally massaging his left temple gently with the tips of two long tapering fingers that quivered very slightly on the ends.

The old aching blood-throb was coming back. He squeezed shut his eyes and snapped them open, resisting a stupor of bored impatience the way a late-night driver desperately battles road euphoria's deadly spell.

One must hang in there, of course. Wait, listen sympathetically for clues, wait for Richie's defense to break—and it would. It always breaks if you wait patiently enough, and Richie's defense—this rigid, obsessive, repetitive account of his wife's imagined affairs with ghostly lovers—must wear itself out like the groove of a stuck record. Then the shriveled and desiccated fragments of Richie's personality could start limping out into the open.

Only we mustn't draw it out too long, Richie. Three months isn't really long, not in here. Three months is only a beginning when the path leads to the end of darkness; but you haven't moved at all, Richie. You revealed so little, then stopped there in the groove and it just goes round and round and round; Lara and her demonic fantasy lovers and your plans for sweet vengeance. That's all I know, Richie, and I must know more; a great deal more about many things.

In your case we simply cannot wait too long. Paranoia, in any form, even that of delusional jealousy and hallucinated lovers, can be dangerous. Proper clinical measures might call for a private sanitarium; but perhaps not. One must be sure—one must have sufficient information . . .

The doctor stopped writing in the spiral notebook. He stared

wistfully at the oversized, prematurely balding top of Richie's head, the way it twisted like a wounded turtle's.

"Richie? Where are you?"

"Last night. I almost had him." Richie's mouth quivered in a baby's primal snarl. "I cut out early from my Wednesday bowling and caught them sneaking around at poolside. Heard them laugh as I slipped in through the garden and climbed over the patio fence. Same guy I told you about before when I nearly caught them parked in the car out at Hanson's Lake. I told you about that."

"Yes, you told me."

"Same guy. Tall, with the low voice."

Richie pounded the wall harder. The doctor rose as quietly as possible and rescued a gold-framed certificate before it jarred loose from the wall and fell to the floor. He put it carefully on the glass-topped desk, *Columbia Institute of Psychiatry, Bayne Kessler, M.D.*

As the doctor turned to tiptoe back to the chair, Richie was elbowed up on his side, his odd, pale sheep eyes straining up with petulant accusation. "You weren't even listening!"

Dr. Kessler sighed and managed a benign smile. "Of course I was listening, Richie. I always listen." He sat down and picked up the spiral notebook and pen from the side table. "Please go on, Richie. You climbed the patio fence—"

Richie flounced over onto his back again. "I had him. See?" He breathed hard as he fumbled from under his suede jacket a strip of raveled white cloth and waved it like a banner. "I chased him. Just as he went over the fence I grabbed his sleeve. He tore loose and ran off through the trees. But I got this. It'll be his neck next time, and I won't lose my grip."

Dr. Kessler squinted uneasily. Torn from a shirt cuff, all right, but from whose shirt, and how? Richie often brought in trophies he claimed were left behind when he frightened away one of Lara's lovers. The cigarette lighter, the fountain pen, the handkerchief, the cigarette butts, the pocketknife, and the rest, like this bit of shirt cuff, never had initials or any other way of identifying their source. Never a wallet, a driver's license, a credit card, or anything that might separate substance from shadows.

Their faces or any distinguishing body features were never quite clear to Richie. It was always night, always too dark, or he was too far away for them to be anything but fading outlines, fantasies of men who were never caught in flagrante delicto. They would never

be caught except in wish-fulfilling dreams; and then, of course, there would be murder most foul.

But how to murder a delusion? Paranoids were clever at turning up substantiative evidence of systematized delusions.

"Know how I knew she'd be with him last night?" Richie waved the raveled snag of sleeve.

"Tell me, Richie."

"The night before last, Tuesday, I told Lara I was dead from lack of sleep and had to have a good night's rest. I pretended to take sleeping pills, only they were aspirin I'd put in the sleeping pill bottle. Then I pretended to be really knocked out on the couch. Lara hung around and shook me to be sure. Later, after she left, I lifted the phone and heard her on the extension setting it up with lover-boy for Wednesday night while I bowled. Same voice, like I told you. I felt sort of cruddy listening and spying . . . but I have to find out who he is so I can get him." He curled up on his side, fists clenched against his chest like a baby with colic.

Dr. Kessler was conscious of covering his growing irritation with a deliberately low, gentle tone. "And Lara? She, of course, denied again that there was anyone there?"

"Sure. Same old business. Maybe it's a plot. Maybe they've made Lara go along with a plot to brainwash me, to make me think I'm out of my tree and seeing little men who aren't there."

"Why would they do that?"

"Some of my daddy's bank. Nearly a million dollars in community property. Hell, don't you know? But I don't care. I know what I see and next time I'm going to get what I see."

*Yesterday upon the stair, Dr. Kessler thought, I saw a man who wasn't there. He wasn't there again today. Oh, how I wish he'd go away.*

This really mustn't go on. Continuing treatment depended on knowing the exact nature of the disease. Persisting doubts about the original diagnosis must be settled. Either real or delusional lovers could serve Richie's defensive needs, but his possible cure could not be served at all by insecure, unsubstantiated diagnosis.

His original, tentative diagnosis of delusional pathological jealousy still seemed right; what evidence he had been able to gather pointed to it. Richie could never identify a lover. He heard their whispers on the phone, in the dark, through walls, in his nightmares and daydreams—but he never turned up a single supportive fact or clue, never any addresses, phone numbers, names, or de-

scriptions. He said they used secret codes, even used telepathic extrasensory perception to frustrate him. On several occasions during sessions, Richie insisted that while Lara waited for him in the car, she was talking with some ubiquitous playmate. When Dr. Kessler looked down there, however, he saw the car, but no one in it—no Lara—no lover.

"There they go," Richie shouted. "Around the corner!"

Dr. Kessler saw no one disappearing around a corner, or into a crowd, or even into thin air. Delusional jealousy was not uncommon. Many had such a low opinion of themselves they couldn't imagine anyone not preferring someone else; but Richie's case added up to a rather extreme, dangerously paranoid form of the disorder. Dr. Kessler still believed that was his problem.

Yet what if that tentative diagnosis had been wrong—or just partly wrong? What if Richie's "delusions" were based on justified suspicion? What if Lara really cheated? Very discreet social inquiries had turned up nothing about Lara that supported Richie's claims, but those inquiries had been very limited by necessary prudence.

Dr. Kessler didn't believe he was wrong, but it was always possible. If he were, it called for a radically different approach to Richie's therapy.

On the other hand, if he were right, he couldn't allow a dangerous state of delusion and fantasy to continue; not without direct clinical action.

Irritation flared up suddenly, out of control. Dr. Kessler stood, leaned over Richie, and heard himself using a surprisingly hard and critical tone. "You're not kidding me, Richie. And you'd better stop kidding yourself. It isn't getting us anywhere, is it?"

Richie looked up and blinked incredulously. After a while he whispered, "What?"

"You don't want to find out who these guys are, Richie. And you never will, because you're a coward. You're afraid to find out. If you do, you know you'll find out something else, the final, unbearable truth—that you're too weak and helpless and afraid to face up to them."

Richie sat up slowly and slid down the couch away from Dr. Kessler's shadow. His face was a pale mixture of betrayed trust—and fear. He began shaking his head from side to side in painful denial.

"Yes, that's how it is, Richie, and in your heart you know it. In your imagination, your fantasies, you enjoy endless plans of bloody

vengeance, but all the time you know that in reality you can only face the terror of your own helplessness and cowardly cringing—”

“No,” Richie said. He jumped up and backed away. “You’re all wrong. So wrong it’s ridiculous.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, yes, and when I catch him you’ll find out how wrong you are, damn you!”

Dr. Kessler shrugged. “It’s so easy to find out who they are, Richie. Do what anyone else would do—hire a private investigator.”

Richie stared for half a minute. “Why . . . how can you—a doctor—suggest such a filthy thing? How can you even think of it?”

“The question is, Richie, why haven’t you thought of it?”

“No! Do you think I’d really have some stranger, some outsider, sneak and spy on my—on Lara—to find out . . . to see what she . . .”

“Sorry, Richie. Your time’s up.”

Richie straightened, snarling, “My time’s up here, period. I’ve had it with you, doctor. You can’t do me any good. You don’t even know why I came here, do you? I came here hoping to be able to help Lara. She’s the one who is sick. She blames me for everything and won’t admit she needs help. But you don’t understand and you can’t help, and I don’t need your help. I know what to do.”

“You may feel differently tomorrow, Richie. I hope so. Call me whenever you feel like it. And—”

Richie went out and slammed the door. His squat shape blurred on the other side of the frosted pane and seemed to drift away through murky water.

Dr. Kessler moved a hand as if to call him back. Then he sank onto the couch while the office slowly turned gray and the aching blood-throb pulsed past his left temple. He massaged the ache ritually with the fingertips of his left hand, the way his mother used to do, knowing it was anger at himself—and fear. Also guilt and uncertainty, for losing his professional control, and giving in to exasperation—letting Richie have such an unprepared shocking broadside of cold truth.

Really shook Richie up, though, the doctor reflected. Shocked through his defenses a little. Really frightened him, without warning, without preparation. Suddenly switching from the role of warm, supportive, sympathetic listener to hard, uncompromising, directive coercion. Sometimes that can be effective; so can shock therapy—sometimes. Coercive, manipulative, authoritarian meth-

ods can also be dangerous. He really did not approve of the technique, especially with a patient about whom he still knew so little. It was almost like performing a surgical operation in the dark. Sometimes it seemed necessary to take risks, but he should be ready to assume responsibility for the result.

Dr. Kessler stood up heavily. He kept massaging his temple as he went to the window and opened the Venetian blind and realized that it was the first time all day that he'd looked out on the world. It had been snowing for hours, and it was nearly dark. There was no sky or earth in the falling quiet, only sifting snow. The world could end and he would never know it as he sat immersed in the debris of some wrecked personality.

He sat at his desk, switched on the green-shaded lamp, and a tatter of white caught his attention. The torn bit of shirt cuff fluttered on the rug near the door like a dead moth.

After peering at it for a moment, Dr. Kessler picked up the phone book and flopped it onto his desk. He rifled nervously through the yellow pages.

Dreams, delusions, lies—they are helpful clues to the unconscious; but first you must have a fair idea what is or is not true.

Ice Cream . . . Ignition Service . . . Illustrators . . . Incinerators . . . Insurance . . .

Investigators—Private.

"Flynn Detective Agency," he read. "Investigations made everywhere. Domestic troubles, personal relations, shadowing, tracing missing persons, locating, surveillance. Skillfully performed—low rates—quick results. Strictly confidential."

He called and told Mr. Flynn to start work at once, that same Friday night, even though it would count as a full day, at fifty dollars a day plus expenses. When Flynn found out anything—or an indisputable absence of anything—he was to phone Dr. Kessler at home or at his office.

Dr. Kessler waited with a tension of which he was conscious even while listening to other patients. Richie did not turn up for his Monday appointment, nor for his Tuesday or Thursday appointments, and he didn't call.

Mr. Flynn phoned Thursday night. "Mrs. Brocia never played around, I can assure you of that. And I'm absolutely sure she isn't playing around now. I'll have a full report for you tomorrow, but first I want to check something out. Something's weird here, doctor."

"Weird?"

"Yes, I think it's weird. I'll call you later."

Friday morning, as Dr. Kessler showed his ten fifty patient out, a heavy, solid man wearing a dark suit of uncertain vintage and a porkpie hat stood in the waiting room.

"Dr. Kessler?" he said softly. His face seemed dour and inflexible, with a permanent cleft of distrust between thick eyebrows.

"Yes," Dr. Kessler said, noticing that the man also had an odd sadness marking the corners of his eyes.

He opened a worn wallet. A golden badge glittered. "Detective Bates," he said. "Homicide."

Dr. Kessler felt a drop of sweat slide down the left side of his nose. It loosened a nervous flush down his back that rippled painfully. "Homicide?"

"We just took Richard Brocia into custody on suspicion of murder. You know him?"

Dr. Kessler realized that his mouth was open and the inside of it was dry. "He's a patient of mine."

"So Mr. Brocia has been telling us."

Dr. Kessler touched his fingers to his left temple. "Can you tell me what happened? Can I see him? I'd like to see him as soon as possible."

"He said he didn't want to see you," Detective Bates said without expression. "But he wanted me to give you this." He held out a folded paper.

Dr. Kessler took it, unfolded it, and read:

Dear Dr. Kessler,

*You said I was a coward, afraid, couldn't do it. Well, I got lover-boy, all right. I got a gun and I shot him seven times, so he won't come messing around any more. You were so wrong about me. You just never understood anything.*

Richie

"I'm—I'm—" Dr. Kessler held the paper out as if he didn't know what to do with it. Detective Bates took it, folded it, and put it back into his pocket as Dr. Kessler went on, "—I'm sorry . . . very sorry to hear this. Who—"

"His wife, first of all."

"Lara?"

"Found her buried, or rather half buried, in the basement. Med-

ical examiner says she's probably been buried there for about three months."

Something skidded slightly.

"The other victim was a guy who evidently tried to dig her out. Brocia came into the basement from the side door and surprised the intruder and started shooting. The victim ran, and died on the stairs leading up out of the basement."

He held out a card. "He had your calling card on him, Dr. Kessler. You know anything about him? A private investigator, name of Flynn?"

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## Miss Evangeline and the Monster

by Leo P. Kelley

**M**iss Evangeline Sabrina Withermane couldn't believe her eyes as she looked out the window of her bedroom and saw the flying saucer circle, spin to the left a little, and then set down just as pretty as you please in the middle of her front lawn flowerbed with not so much as a by-your-leave.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed aloud. "Right in the middle of my jack-in-the-pulpits. They're ruined beyond repair, no doubt about it."

She didn't wait for the little green men to disembark. There simply wasn't time. She would have to make a report to the police at once. It was urgent. Why, perhaps the whole town was being invaded—the entire planet maybe.

She scuttled downstairs, picked up the telephone in the hall, dialed the familiar number of the police station, and waited for the ringing to begin. When it didn't after two agonizing minutes, she remembered. They had disconnected her; nonpayment of bills or some such nonsense. She had told the phone company that she was certain she had paid her bills, but they insisted she hadn't—not for months. Being the lady that she was, she had refused to argue further and spent the rest of the day in a blue sulk.

She put down the phone with distaste. Actually, she had never really liked the machine to begin with, not since the very day her papa had had it installed all those lost years ago. She preferred face-to-face contact with people, preferably genteel.

She hurried out to the garage behind her ancient house, which was circa 1800, and got into the vintage Packard her papa had taught her to drive not long before he was unkind enough to die and leave her not only heartbroken but all alone. She rolled out the open doors of the garage like a Sherman tank and rumbled down the driveway.

The saucer, she noted, was still sitting insultingly on her lawn. Well, she'd see about that, oh, wouldn't she just!



IT SET DOWN JUST AS PRETTY AS YOU PLEASE IN THE MIDDLE OF HER  
FRONT LAWN FLOWERBED.

Later, as she parked in the central square of the small southern town, she noticed the letters lying on the seat beside her. She picked them up. One was from someplace called the City Tax Bureau. Another was from the water company. Would they never leave a lady in peace? She got out of the car and dropped them, unopened, into the trash can on the corner.

Past the statue of the Confederate soldier, past the tiny post office and all the little shops, went Miss Evangeline Sabrina Withermene. She marched up the steps of the police station and into its relatively cool interior. Flying saucers on a Monday! It was simply no way to begin a week.

"Afternoon, Miss Evangeline," said Patrolman Carson, who was standing near the entrance reading the notices on the bulletin board. "Nice day."

She gave him a polite nod and asked to see Sergeant MacReynolds.

"Something wrong, Miss Evangeline?" Carson inquired.

"Indeed there is. I want to register a complaint."

"Something bothering you again?"

"Yes, officer. A flying saucer."

Carson whistled softly through his teeth. "A flying saucer, is it? Last week, when we met over at the drugstore, you told me you wanted to report—what was it you wanted to report that day, Miss Evangeline?"

"The Mulberry Mall Monster," she replied. "But I haven't time to go into all that now. Where is Sergeant MacReynolds?"

"In his office."

Miss Evangeline marched down the hall and into Sergeant MacReynolds' office, trailing magnolia scent like an elegant feather boa behind her.

As she entered his office, MacReynolds glanced up from the papers on his desk and sighed at the sight of her. "Good afternoon, Miss Evangeline," he said, and sat back in his chair.

"Good day to you, sergeant. I want to report a flying saucer."

"Well, well."

"It landed on my front lawn at exactly three oh-nine this afternoon. I looked at my watch as it landed—three oh-nine exactly. Will you send a squad car or whatever it is that should be sent—at once? It's sitting right there in the middle of my jack-in-the-pulpits, which you know I prize most highly."

"Is it from Mars?"

"However would I know? That's for you to find out. I notice you're not writing this down."

MacReynolds sighed a second time before picking up a pencil and beginning to write on a blank piece of paper.

Miss Evangeline turned toward the door, but before leaving the office she glanced back at MacReynolds, who had stopped writing. "You do believe me, don't you?" Her voice was plaintive. MacReynolds heard a lost little girl hidden in it.

"Now, Miss Evangeline," he said. "I'll send someone over to investigate. Don't you fret."

"Thank you ever so much, sergeant. You see, my jack-in-the-pulpits—"

"I'll have Patrolman Carson investigate first thing. Goodbye, Miss Evangeline."

When she had gone, MacReynolds looked down at the piece of paper on which he had written: *Bats in the old girl's belfry.* "Carson!" he yelled.

Carson appeared instantly in the doorway. "She's at it again, right, sergeant?"

MacReynolds frowned. "Don't they teach you youngsters respect for your elders any more? Yes, she's at it again. But why wouldn't she be? She lives on a pittance from her father's estate, which is doled out to her annually by a law firm up in New York, and what was good enough twenty years ago isn't worth a damn today. You ever heard of inflation?"

"Sorry, sergeant."

"I'm sorry, too. A lady like Miss Evangeline just isn't properly equipped to deal with our nervous world. Sometimes I'm not so sure I am, either." MacReynolds muttered something about the bomb.

Carson cleared his throat a moment later.

MacReynolds looked up and drifted back to the present and the matter at hand. "A flying saucer landed on Miss Evangeline's lawn at three oh-nine this afternoon." His expression warned Carson not to smile. "I want you to drive by—make sure she sees you—and do whatever a policeman is supposed to do when investigating a flying saucer."

Carson promised that he would do just that. Right away.

Instead of going home to face the bizarre evidence of interplanetary invasion plopped on her front lawn, Miss Evangeline drove

to Mulberry Mall, where she had made up her mind to spend the rest of the afternoon. She had no idea how long it would take Patrolman Carson to disperse the flock of flying saucers she imagined must be parked in the neighborhood by now, frightening people.

She parked outside Mulberry Mall, which got its name from the mulberry bushes planted along its north border, separating the mall itself from the mayor's ornate mansion, which adjoined it. There were more bushes growing along the promenade that began beside the river and ambled along for nearly a mile and a half.

As Miss Evangeline entered the mall, she saw that the daily invasion of children had taken place. They possessed the mall totally. They were everywhere—on the swings and teeter-totters and sliding boards, burrowing in the sandboxes, and threatening to break their necks on the jungle gyms. The sight of them pleased her. She had, during recent years, come to feel much more comfortable with the children, far more comfortable than she was able to feel with their parents, who insisted upon discussing such confusing matters as stock options and floating (or was it sinking?) bond issues and Christian Dior. But the children—oh, they were quite something else! She often helped them build their forts or find four-leaf clovers or scale the heights of Xanadu.

She sat down on a bench in the shade of her favorite elm tree, her large knitting bag at her side, and looked around at what she had come to think of as her territory. Everything seemed to be in order, but she couldn't be entirely sure, of course, because she had forgotten to bring her glasses and the effect without them was both disarming and disconcerting. Disarming because it gave a slight but pleasant haze to her surroundings, and disconcerting because she could not sort out the faces of the children according to the names that she knew belonged to them. Well, never mind, she advised herself. This afternoon she would simply sit and suffer the little children to come unto her—if only they would.

The first one did a few minutes later.

The little girl's name was Mary and she had cut herself. She displayed her wound proudly to Miss Evangeline, who promptly rummaged through her knitting bag and brought out a bottle of antiseptic and daubed some of the red liquid on Mary's bony knee.

"Do you ever slide?" Mary asked.

For a moment, Miss Evangeline didn't quite understand the

question. Then she said, "Oh, dear me, no. I haven't been on a sliding board in ever so long."

"Why not?" Mary wanted to know.

The answer that occurred to Miss Evangeline was absolutely unutterable, so she shooed the shockingly young child back to her playmates, simply refusing to reply.

Through the elms, she could see the mayor's mansion. It gleamed whitely in the late afternoon sun. She had never seen the mayor in any one of the mansion's many windows, but she was always expecting him to appear, if only briefly. She was a staunch supporter of his and of the party to which they both belonged. He didn't know of her existence, of course, but she knew of his, and if things were a bit unbalanced in that regard, well, such was the way of the world.

She suddenly remembered that a mayoralty election was due—why, next week! She pulled a notebook and ballpoint pen from her knitting bag and made a note to remind herself to vote. After all, it was her civic duty.

She fed small biscuits to a boxer and a cocker spaniel who passed her bench during the next hour.

She looked out several times toward the river, but the Mulberry Mall Monster did not appear. She had seen it twice now. The first time, she had called out to the people nearby as she pointed at it, but they had missed seeing it. They had merely shaken their heads and smiled in the oddest way. The Monster was clever and had evidently been too quick for them. But she had seen it! She made another note: *Tell Sergeant MacReynolds to bring depth charges.*

The Mulberry Mall Monster's days were numbered, she thought with grim satisfaction as she gazed serenely across the mall.

Now what was that man doing over there by the red maple? She squinted, damning her eyes for growing so old so soon.

Pinning a note to the maple tree, that's what he was doing. She got up and hurried over to him, not caring that curiosity killed cats, or so people said.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Evangeline," the man said, turning at the sound of her approach.

"Hello, Mr. Michelson." She squinted. "What's that? A message for someone?"

"It's a note offering a reward for the return of Mitzi, our poodle. She was stolen right here on the mall yesterday. I was here with

my wife and little boy, and Mitzi was off the leash and running around and all of a sudden she was gone."

"She ran away?"

"No. Mrs. Ralston was nearby, and she told me later that she saw a man pick Mitzi up and run off with her. I'm offering a two hundred and fifty dollar reward."

"That's a great deal of money," Miss Evangeline said with surprise.

"My little boy cries all the time since we lost Mitzi. So the money doesn't matter."

"Not in terms of tears, no," Miss Evangeline agreed sagely if a little vaguely. "I do hope you get poor Mitzi back." She strolled back to her bench and watched the windows of the mayor's mansion, but he didn't appear, not even for a moment. So she shut her eyes to rest them.

When she opened her eyes again, the sun had gone out. There were stars in the sky. Why, she had been asleep! And there was Mr. Michelson at the red maple as if no time at all had passed. She watched him remove the note from the tree as she eased herself to her feet, cursing the stiffness that ached in her ankles and knees. She had almost reached the exit from the mall when Mr. Michelson came abreast of her.

"You were taking the note down," she said. "You must have found Mitzi," she added hopefully.

He shook his head, but there was a happy smile on his face. "No, not yet. But a man phoned and said he had her and would consider meeting me and turning her over to me if I asked no questions. I assured him I'd ask no questions. I just want Mitzi back. He might be the thief, but I don't care about that. I'm on my way to meet him now."

"You should have called Sergeant MacReynolds. Stealing dogs is a criminal matter." Miss Evangeline fell silent for a moment. "No," she mused, "it probably wouldn't have helped all that much even if you had called him. I reported an earthquake under my house to him just last week, and he told me I was imagining things."

"Goodbye, Miss Evangeline," Mr. Michelson said. "Can you get home alone all right?"

"Most certainly. Good night, Mr. Michelson. Say hello to Mitzi for me."

She walked to where she had parked the Packard and got in. She spent some time searching for the ignition key, but at last she

found it in the bottom of her knitting bag. She started the motor. As she drove up the street, she passed Mr. Michelson standing in the shadowy entrance to the alley that ran behind the shops on Main Street. She drove on slowly because the darkness of the town and the dimness of her eyes urged caution on her. She glanced in the rear view mirror to be sure no one was close behind her before preparing for the turn that would lead her onto her own street.

She saw Mr. Michelson and another man standing on the deserted street beside the alley entrance. But where was Mitzi? She slowed down then, shocked, as she saw Mr. Michelson raise his arm but fail to shield himself from the blow the other man delivered. She stopped her car in the middle of the street as Mr. Michelson fell to the pavement and the other man knelt beside him and began to go through his pockets. She got out of the car and hurried breathlessly back to where Mr. Michelson lay groaning and holding his head. She helped him get to his feet and he told her that the man had stolen his wallet and the reward money he had brought with him.

"But what about Mitzi?"

Mr. Michelson grimaced and touched the base of his skull. "He laughed when I asked him where Mitzi was. He just laughed and then he hit me."

"Call the police at once."

Mr. Michelson said he didn't want any trouble. If he called the police, their activities might scare the man away for good, and then perhaps he'd never get Mitzi back.

Miss Evangeline secretly decided she would personally report the incident to Sergeant MacReynolds, but when she arrived home later, after dropping Mr. Michelson off, she decided it wouldn't do any good because the flying saucer still sat smack in the middle of her flowerbed, glowing greenly in the light of the moon. Patrolman Carson had failed to remove it.

The next afternoon, Miss Evangeline sat close to the mulberry bushes on the mall, looking as inconspicuous as just another berry. She had planned it that way. The Monster might appear at any minute and she didn't want it to spot her before she had a chance to sound an alarm.

She had remembered to bring her glasses with her this time, so she clearly recognized Patrolman Carson while he was still some distance away from her.

As he came up to her, he said, "Hello, Miss Evangeline. I'd

planned to give your flying saucer a ticket for illegal parking yesterday, but when I got to your place it had gone. I did notice, though, that your jack-in-the-pulpits weren't a bit crushed."

She eyed him suspiciously. It was true that her flowers, this morning, had stood as straight and brightly staunch as if no saucer had ever landed on them, but that would undoubtedly have something to do with the invaders' advanced aerodynamics. Carson was lying to her because the saucer had still been there when she arrived home last night. She was about to accuse him of lying when a new thought occurred to her. Perhaps the saucer had taken off during the day and then returned later. That would explain why Carson hadn't seen it. Perhaps he wasn't lying after all. She began to feel more kindly toward him. She searched in her knitting bag and brought out a candy bar which she handed to him with a conciliatory smile. He took it, touched his cap, and was off down one of the paths, whistling a tune by the Beatles.

Miss Evangeline surveyed her domain with a certain uneasiness. She was thinking about Mitzi and poor Mr. Michelson and his sad little boy. The theft was a shameful thing to have happen right under the nose, so to speak, of the mayor. If the opposition party ever found out about it, it might mean political disaster for the incumbent—a lost election. She tried not to think about it any more, vowing that she would not tell tales out of school, and Mr. Michelson, she recalled, had said he wouldn't report the matter to the police. So perhaps all would still be well for the mayor. She concentrated on the others who shared the mall with her, counting them, categorizing them.

An old man over there feeding pigeons from a brown paper bag—that would be Joe Carlotto, who was on Social Security; two ladies, almost as old as herself, strolling along the river promenade; the inevitable children—everywhere, the nannies with their prams.

But who in the world was that one in the white uniform and the bleached hair? She looked like a fugitive from the chorus line of some cheap nightclub. Miss Evangeline didn't mean to be unkind; it was simply that she was a keen and usually correct observer of people and their characters.

The girl—she couldn't have been more than twenty-five—sat down on a nearby bench, the pram she had been wheeling parked beside her. She unrolled the glossy magazine she had been carrying tucked under one arm. Miss Evangeline pushed her glasses up on her nose and stared at the cover: *Screen Dreams*.

A boy and girl, arm in arm and oblivious to Miss Evangeline, the mall, and all the rest of the world, strolled by. Miss Evangeline knew she had nothing in her knitting bag that they might want or could possibly use. They were young and had each other. She sighed and closed her eyes and dozed in the spattering of warm sunlight that spilled through the leaves and landed on her thin shoulders.

When she woke up again, something was wrong. She could feel it! The children were all right. All the dogs were walking safely on their leashes. The mayor's mansion was still there. Then what?

It was the man sitting beside the girl with the copy of *Screen Dreams* in her lap. The two of them were talking earnestly—whispering. The girl didn't seem to mind the man's thin mustache or the evil in his eyes; but Miss Evangeline minded. She looked about for Patrolman Carson, but he had vanished. She tried to think calmly. What should she do?

She wouldn't scream. Ladies did not scream. Before she could arrive at a decision, events began to unfold before her. The man got up and walked away, but not far. He loitered near the ice cream vendor's truck. The girl promptly put down her magazine, winked at him, closed her eyes, and immediately began to snore. The man sauntered back toward her, but instead of waking her, as Miss Evangeline had thought he was going to do, he began to push the perambulator down the path. Within seconds, he had disappeared from sight.

Miss Evangeline sat stunned, her mouth frozen in an unuttered cry, her hands clenched in her lap.

The girl pretended to awaken, and then she screamed. Her scream was twice as loud as the town's fire siren. All activity in the park came to a standstill. Everyone stared and then came running to the girl's side—even the children.

"The baby!" the girl screamed at the top of her shrill voice. "Someone's stolen the *ba-by!* Help! Police!"

Miss Evangeline, icily calm and thoroughly determined, got up from her bench and walked toward the girl. She heard the comments from the gathered crowd as she approached.

"He wore sunglasses and a fedora. I saw him just as plain!" That was Mrs Ralston.

Joe Carlotto patted the girl in what Miss Evangeline considered to be a most indiscreet place and manner, and said, "Don't you worry none, hon. They'll catch whoever it was."

"It was a woman," someone volunteered. "Tall, she was."

Miss Evangeline pursed her lips and thought that none of them would be able to identify a fly in amber even after they'd seen it twenty times. She plowed through the crowd.

"There, there," she said soothingly to the girl. To Carlotto, she said, "Call the police at the box on the corner." To Mrs. Ralston, she said, "Get some water from the drinking fountain." To the girl, she repeated, "There, there." And then, "I'll take you to—where does the baby live?"

The girl sobbed and said, "His name's Sonny Emory. He lives—he lived . . ." She began to cry, muddying her eyes with mascara.

When Mrs. Ralston returned with the water in a paper cup, Miss Evangeline and the girl were gone.

In the Emory living room, Mrs. Emory was having hysterics. Miss Evangeline had phoned for a doctor, who came and promptly gave Mrs. Emory an injection. The girl sat sobbing on a stiff chair in the middle of the room. Patrolman Carson arrived as a result of Miss Evangeline's urgent summons.

"We checked," he said, "and found the baby carriage down on the promenade. It was empty."

Mrs. Emory shrieked for her husband. The doctor had already phoned Mr. Emory's office and asked him to come home at once.

Miss Evangeline listened to the answers the girl gave to Patrolman Carson's questions.

Her name was Polly Loring. Yes, she had references.

Had Mrs. Emory checked them before she was hired?

No, Mrs. Emory had not, being anxious to hire someone to help her with Sonny.

Mrs. Emory moaned.

Carson wanted to know if the Emorys had any enemies.

None, according to Mrs. Emory.

Had they received any threats lately—of any kind?

Mrs. Emory shook her head.

Mr. Emory arrived half an hour later, and Carson questioned him. The distraught Mr. Emory could supply no information of value.

No one asked Miss Evangeline anything, so she left.

Twenty minutes later, she followed Carson's patrol car at a discreet distance, and when he escorted Polly Loring into the police station for what Miss Evangeline assumed would be the third de-

gree, she parked across the street to wait. She opened her knitting bag and took out a leatherbound copy of Browning, but she couldn't concentrate on the words, lovely as they were.

The girl came out half an hour later. She walked jauntily up the street and turned the corner.

Miss Evangeline drove after her, keeping out of sight.

The girl entered the Queen's Arms Hotel. Miss Evangeline knew all about what went on *there*. Everyone in town did. She parked her car and strode stiffly into the lobby. Polly Loring was nowhere in sight.

Miss Evangeline went up to the desk and rapped on it impatiently until the tieless room clerk appeared. "Mr. Evanston, I'm Miss Evangeline Sabrina—"

"Howdy, Miss Withermane. What brings you here?"

"There was a kidnapping on Mulberry Mall this afternoon and—"

"Hooeee!" Mr. Evanston exclaimed. "Everybody in town's talking about it already. Biggest thing that's happened around here since Joe Carlotto tried to blow up the Social Security office last year."

"The nursemaid involved—Miss Polly Loring—is staying here, I believe."

"Yes, indeed. Room 190."

Miss Evangeline went to the elevator and up to Room 190. She knocked firmly on the door, her mouth grim; but she remembered to smile sweetly as the door opened a crack.

"Who're you?" Polly Loring asked, peering out into the dimly lighted hall.

"My dear, I was on the mall this afternoon when the Emory baby was kidnapped. Don't you remember me? I helped you—"

"Oh, sure. Yeah, I remember you now. But listen, I got a splitting headache, you know?"

"I saw the man who took the boy."

Polly flung open the door she had been closing in Miss Evangeline's face. "You saw him?"

Miss Evangeline drew an index finger across her upper lip. "He had a rather sickly-looking mustache. He wore tan slacks and a checkered sweater. He looked like vanilla ice cream, his face, I mean, so pale."

Polly sputtered something Miss Evangeline didn't quite catch. "May I come in, dear? I'd like to talk to you a moment, if I may."

Polly reluctantly stepped aside as Miss Evangeline pushed open the door and stepped into the shabby room. She promptly sat down

and told Polly she was frightened nearly out of her wits. She told her about the flying saucer and about the Mulberry Mall Monster. "Now this," she said. "I'm afraid for my life savings," she added significantly.

"Your life savings," Polly repeated.

"All fifty thousand dollars," Miss Evangeline said, shocked at the enormity of the lie she had uttered. "Perhaps I really should put it in a bank—"

"You keep it at home?"

"Don't trust banks. Never did."

Polly's eyes grew wider.

"Well, the reason I came," Miss Evangeline said, getting down to business, "was that I wanted to ask you if perchance you had recognized the man who kidnapped Sonny, as a result of my description of him. If you have any idea who he is, it would make matters so much simpler for the police. I'm afraid they would never listen to me, but if you went to them and identified the—"

"No," Polly said, shaking her head. "I got no idea who he is."

"Well," said Miss Evangeline, "that is a pity. I'd best be going, then."

She was almost out in the hall when she heard the dog bark from inside Polly's room. Polly was trying to shut the door, but Miss Evangeline held her ground. "Your—your poodle?" she prompted, opening the trap.

Polly nodded. "Yeah, I keep her shut in the bathroom. She's messy. She was a gift from a guy I know."

"Well, you take care of yourself, dear. You've had a terrible shock. Here." Miss Evangeline extracted a bottle of aspirin from her knitting bag. "Take two of these and draw the shades and lie down with a cool cloth on your head. I'm so sorry to have disturbed you."

She went out into the hall and, satisfied with her performance, walked to the elevator. Well, she guessed she knew where Mitzi was now. But where was Sonny Emory? In the bathroom, too? She had no time to speculate further. She had to hurry home. She was expecting guests later in the evening.

At eleven o'clock that night, Miss Evangeline darkened her house, put a wool shawl over her shoulders, and stepped out onto the porch. She shut the door, locked it, walked to her Packard, got in, and drove off into the night.

She parked the Packard just a block away and walked back

behind the hedges growing on the lawns of the houses across from her own. The night was cool, but she found her shawl sufficient for it.

At eleven thirty, the guests she had been expecting arrived. They slid like shadows up the lawn and onto the porch, where they tried the front door and found it locked. The man opened a window. The girl climbed inside, and he followed her.

Miss Evangeline quickly crossed the street, and went around to the side of her house. She pulled up the slanting cellar doors and descended the steps into the furnace room. She could hear them moving noisily about upstairs. Inept, she thought. She hoped their ineptness would not cause harm to the Emory baby—or to Mitzi. Well, she would simply do what she had to do, pray a little, and hope for the very best.

She quietly mounted the steps that led to her kitchen and opened the door cautiously. They were still in the living room. She could see the beams of their flashlights flitting along the floors and up the walls.

"I looked upstairs," Polly whispered. "She's not in the house. Look, Jack. There it is!"

He swore softly, staring at the wall safe. "We'll have to tear down the wall to get at the loot."

Miss Evangeline stifled a gasp. She hoped they wouldn't do that. The repair bill would be staggering. She'd never be able to afford it. She listened, peeping uneasily around the corner of the kitchen cabinets.

Polly was shining the beam of her flashlight on the wall safe. The man was fumbling hopelessly with the dial.

"Jack, look out!" Polly screeched in sudden alarm. "The wall's caving in!"

Miss Evangeline clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle the giggle that almost escaped her lips.

"Well, will you look at that," Jack exclaimed. "A secret room. I just touched the corner of the mirror there, and the fireplace swung out. Shine your flashlight in there."

Polly did as she was told, and they both spotted the piles of money stacked in a far corner.

"Come on!" Jack whooped, stooping to enter the room, Polly right behind him.

Miss Evangeline scurried mouselike out into the dark living room, expertly dodging furniture. "It's no good!" she shouted gle-

fully. "It's *Confederate* money!" Then she slammed the fireplace back into position, flush with the rest of the wall.

The muffled shouts and the pounding from behind the wall gave her a keen sense of satisfaction. She switched on the lights and picked up the phone to call Sergeant MacReynolds.

"Drat!" she exclaimed in annoyance when she remembered that the instrument had been disconnected. She left the house and her helpless prisoners locked in the secret room and walked to where she had earlier parked the Packard. Conscientiously observing the speed limit, she drove to the police station.

The next day she sat in her rocker on the front porch and waited for them to come for her. It had all been so exciting. She didn't sleep a wink the whole night through, after the police had come back to her house with her and had released Polly and Jack from the secret room behind the fireplace that had once served to hide runaway slaves when the house, which had been in Miss Evangeline's family for years, had been a station on the underground railroad.

Sergeant MacReynolds had come back later and congratulated her, after taking Polly and Jack to the jail in the courthouse. She told him she had just been doing her duty. After all, she couldn't tolerate such goings-on right under the nose of the mayor. It could ruin his career, and she wanted to see him elected for another term.

Ah, there they were, just pulling up in front of the house in their squad car. She got up and went down the drive to meet them.

Sergeant MacReynolds got out, and she took his arm and sat beside him in the back seat while Patrolman Carson drove them to Mulberry Mall and through the wrought-iron gates that led to the mayor's mansion.

The mayor took Miss Evangeline's hand and kissed it, precisely as she had known a gentleman of his stature would do under the circumstances.

"I wanted very much to meet you, Miss Evangeline," he said, "after Sergeant MacReynolds told me all about you. He told me you were a staunch supporter of mine. He told me, too, how you caught the kidnappers—"

"They were dognappers, too," Miss Evangeline interjected.

"Yes, that too. Well, thanks to your presence of mind and, if I may say so, your *daring*, Sonny Emory is back safe and sound with

his parents once again. They found him, as you know, sound asleep in that terrible man's room at the Queen's Arms Hotel."

"And Mr. Michelson and his little boy have Mitzi back."

"Yes, Mitzi, too. You are a remarkable woman, Miss Evangeline."

"A woman, yes," Miss Evangeline said softly. "But remarkable? Oh, dear me, no."

"Tush," said the mayor. "You're far too modest."

Later, over tea served in the Robert E. Lee Room, the mayor informed Miss Evangeline that her antebellum home had been, at his direction, designated a city landmark. "I had no idea that your lovely house had a secret room or that the room had served as a station on the underground railroad. Now that just might raise a few eyebrows in this town, still—"

Miss Evangeline said, "If the legends are true, Mr. Mayor, it also provided a hiding place for retreating Confederate soldiers on more than one occasion."

"We'll emphasize that fact in our press release about the house." He went on to explain to Miss Evangeline that her property would be tax-exempt from now on as a result of the executive order he had issued. He explained that her telephone would be reconnected and paid for, of course, by the city, as befitting her home's newly-declared status. He told her that she would be appointed official caretaker of the newly-created city landmark and that she would be paid a modest but, he hoped, a satisfactory monthly salary, quite in keeping with the latest cost-of-living index issued by the federal government.

He was so kind and the room was so pleasant and MacReynolds and Carson were so full of smiles Miss Evangeline simply could not resist making the most of her opportunity. She leaned over and whispered something to the mayor.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. He started to smile and then thought better of it. "MacReynolds!" he said in his mayor's voice. "Miss Evangeline has just given me a report on what she calls the Mulberry Mall Monster. It seems that it is some sort of—of—"

"Sea serpent," Miss Evangeline supplied helpfully. "I've seen it twice in our river next to the mall. Most unsightly, especially considering the neighborhood."

"A sea serpent!" Carson spluttered. "She *couldn't* have seen a sea serpent! Not in *our* river!"

MacReynolds silenced him with a fierce glance.

"Patrolman Carson," said the mayor solemnly, "Miss Evangeline's keen perceptions are what led to the capture of the kidnappers of Sonny Emory—"

"And the dognappers of Mitzi," Miss Evangeline reminded him gently.

"Yes. Of course. So under the circumstances, an investigation of the Mulberry Mall Monster would seem to be definitely in order."

"Definitely," said MacReynolds.

"I'll expect a full report," the mayor said.

MacReynolds and Carson left the room.

Miss Evangeline sipped her tea and found it sweet.

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# A Piece of Rice Cake

by Martin Limón

**I**t seemed that half our blotter reports lately had something to do with gambling.

Maybe it was the beautiful autumn in Korea, when the green leaves of summer turn to orange and yellow and brown and people realize that they are heading for that long cold winter we call death.

"Take a chance! You only go round once."

Not what Buddha or Confucius would have said, but this is the modern Korea and the rules are changing. And the GI's stationed over here have got nothing better to do anyway than throw away their money.

I thumbed through the blotter reports. A Korean businessman busted in a poker game on the compound; an NCO Club bartender rifling the night's receipts to cover his "flower card" losses; a GI collared running a shell game in the barracks.

And so when the first sergeant called me and my partner, Ernie Bascom, into his office and gave us our assignment, it didn't come as much of a surprise.

"Somebody stole the football

pool on the army and navy game over at the Officer's Club."

We stared in mock horror. Ernie spoke first.

"Has the 8th Army been put on alert?"

"Yeah, wise guy. On alert. This may not seem too serious to you two, but the 8th Army chief of staff is about to soil his shorts. 'Besmirching the honor of the army-navy tradition,' he said."

Whenever they start talking tradition, honor, or country, look out for your brisket.

"How much money did he have invested?" I said.

The first sergeant sighed, took a sip of his lukewarm coffee, and ignored me.

"I'd put Burrows and Slabem on the case—they got more respect for the officer corps than you two guys—but they're on a case out at ASCOM City right now. So all I got left is you two."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Top."

"Don't mention it."

The first sergeant set down his coffee and smiled at us. There was a warning in that smile. Something about not screwing up.

"The pool money was collected by the bartender, Miss Pei . . ."

"A female bartender? On a military installation? I thought the union didn't allow that."

"Normally they don't, but this is the Officer's Club and the union honchos want to keep the 8th Army staff happy."

"At the Enlisted Club, all we got to look at is that crusty old Mr. Huang."

"You should have gone to Officer's Candidate School."

"Too late to become a brown-noser," Ernie said.

The first sergeant shook his head. "All right, Bascom. And you too, Sueño. I don't care what your personal feelings are about the Officer's Club. This is a simple matter, and I want you to keep it that way. No nosing around for things that don't concern you, and no mouthing off to those officers over there."

Ernie pointed to his chest and mouthed a silent, "Us?"

"Yeah, you! Miss Pei is over there now, tending bar for the lunch crowd. At about thirteen hundred I want you to check it out and give me a complete report. Keep it simple, keep it neat, and don't get yourselves into any trouble."

"Piece of rice cake," Ernie said. "Not to worry, Top."

The first sergeant frowned as we got up and walked towards the door. All I could think about

was the number of times I've gagged on a wad of thick chewy rice cake.

Terrible stuff.

**H**alfway down the carpeted hallway of the 8th Army Officer's Club I was slapped with the familiar aroma of stale beer, sliced lemon, and liberally sloshed disinfectant.

Home.

Miss Pei was behind the bar, cleaning up and doing her post-lunch-hour inventory. There weren't any officers left in the bar, as the chief of staff keeps the place closed during the afternoon.

Miss Pei stood up and looked at us as we approached. Her face was flushed, and she appeared nervous. It hadn't been a good day. A wisp of straight black hair hung down across her forehead, and she brushed it back with her chubby hand and short brown forearm.

"You C.I.D.?" she asked.

"That's us," Ernie said. "Criminal Investigation Division, Yongsan Detachment."

Miss Pei wore a neatly pressed white blouse and a red skirt. She was a very attractive young lady and I could see why the chief of staff preferred this young flower gracing his cocktail lounge to some old curmudgeon like Mr. Huang.

"All the money is back," she said. "I made a mistake. There is no problem."

We looked at her for a moment, not sure what to say, and then a tall thin American in a baby blue three-piece suit hustled out of the hallway and wound through the cocktail tables.

"George! Ernie! I tried to get in touch with you, but your first sergeant told me you'd already left. It was all a mistake. We found the money locked in the liquor cabinet and it's all there and there's nothing to worry about, but I'm glad you guys came anyway. Can I buy you a drink?"

"I thought the bar was closed?"

"For chumps. For you guys it's always open."

"I'll take a beer," Ernie said.

I shrugged. What the hell. It wasn't often that Freddy bought anything. Not unless you had him over a barrel. I turned to Miss Pei.

"I'll take a Falstaff."

"Two Falstaff?" She held up two short stubby fingers. Ernie nodded.

I looked at Freddy. "How the hell did you get over here? They kick you out of the NCO Club?"

"Naw, nothing like that," Freddy said. "That mush-for-brains Ballard was losing money here, so they sent me over two months ago. Already we're back

in the black. Made a profit of two thousand dollars last month, and we're climbing."

"You must know how to handle these officers."

"Nothing to it. Tell 'em that they're smart and make them feel like they're getting something for free and they'll let you manage the place like you want to manage it."

"You mean, steal the club blind."

"Come on, George. You know better than that. We're audited all the time."

"A guy like you, Freddy, should be able to outsmart an auditor any day of the week."

His eyes sparkled at that, but he didn't say anything.

Ernie finished his beer and got another one from Miss Pei. As long as it was free, he didn't have time to talk.

"You say it was a mistake?"

"Yeah," Freddy said. "This new clown of an assistant manager I got, fresh out of club management school, he didn't look hard enough and told the chief of staff about it before he got his head out of his ass and checked with me. It was just misplaced, that's all. I counted it myself. It's all there."

"Miss Pei said that the money had been 'put back.' "

Freddy shot her a look. She froze, like a squirrel in front of a hunter.

"Just a figure of speech she uses, that's all."

"Let me see the money, Freddy."

"Sure. No sweat, George. No sweat."

He snapped his fingers, and Miss Pei bent down into her liquor cabinet and soon reappeared with a gigantic brandy snifter full of crisp green bills.

"And I'll need the chart, or whatever you used to record the money put into the pool."

Freddy went around behind the bar and helped Miss Pei take down a large cardboard poster that was taped to the mirror.

She laid it on the bar, and I studied it for a moment. A hundred squares, ten by ten, were drawn on the board. Across the top and down the left side, each square was numbered zero to nine. For a set amount you bought a square, and if your numbers were, say, three and seven, and the final score of the game turned out to be twenty-three to seventeen, the two last digits matched yours and you won the pool—the total amount of money bought in for. If each square cost a dollar, and they were all sold, your take would be a hundred dollars. In this case it was a little steeper.

"Five dollar pool," I said. "These guys were getting serious."

"The army-navy game,"

Freddy said. "Half these guys were cadets at West Point way back when Christ was a corporal. It's like a religion to them."

I noticed a number of entries marked "SMF" in red felt pen. The chief of staff's initials.

First I started to count the number of blocks that were filled in with somebody's signature, but there were so many of them that I just counted the empty blocks. There were five. Ninety-five were filled in. That meant there should be a total of four hundred and seventy-five dollars in the brandy snifter. The bills were crisp, and I had to peel them off of one another carefully. Twenty-three twenties, a ten, and a five. It was all there.

"It balances out, Freddy."

"You want another beer?"

"Yeah."

Miss Pei served us both, deftly and silently.

I could have let it go. All the money was there, each square in the poster was accounted for, but there was the crispness of the bills. They hadn't been collected by the bartender as she went along during the workday over the weeks preceding the game; a five dollar bill here, a twenty dollar bill there. These bills had all been put in together. Even the serial numbers were in sequence. Fresh stuff. Right out of the Finance Office. My guess was that when some-

body blew the whistle on him, Freddy had hustled into his cashier's cage, gotten the money, and replenished the brandy snifter so everything balanced.

"You mind if I take a look at the liquor cabinet?"

"No. Go ahead."

I walked around behind the bar. Stepping on the planks, I realized that I towered over Miss Pei. She was much more in control when us foreign monsters were seated on the other side of the counter. The liquor cabinets had sliding wooden doors with hasps and padlocks. None of them appeared to have been tampered with, and there was no evidence of any recent repair work. Whoever had gotten to the brandy snifter had access to the area while the liquor cabinets were open or used a key.

While I was down there checking, I noticed Miss Pei's clipboard with her daily bar inventory on it. It listed all the various types of liquor and beer served in the 8th Army Officer's Club. She had accounted for each shot poured, multiplied that total by the cost per drink, and compared the grand total to the amount of money taken in during her shift. It matched to the penny. Not an ounce of liquor had been wasted.

I stood up and rotated my back to loosen it up. "No sign of tampering with the locks."

"I told you," Freddy said. "It was all a mistake. The money's all here, what are you worried about?"

I ignored him and walked to the front of the bar. "Let's check the cashier's cage, Freddy."

As I walked towards the front lobby, Freddy followed. "You don't have a right! You came here to check out the football pool, not to rummage around in my cashier's cage."

I stopped when we got out in the hallway and put my finger up to Freddy's nose. "I'm in the middle of an investigation, Freddy, in a government-owned facility. If you try to interfere, I'll arrest you."

Freddy stared at me, his thin brown mustache quivering with rage.

"You're an idiot, George."

Ernie passed us on his way to the cashier's cage, his Falstaff still in his hand. "That's what everybody tells him. Doesn't do any good, though. He's still the same."

The middle-aged bespectacled woman in the cashier's cage stood up as we entered. I went right to work. The total amount of operating funds for the club was posted on the side of the safe and signed by the Yongsan Director of Personnel and Community Affairs. The total was eight thousand five hundred dollars in U.S. money and fif-

teen hundred dollars' worth of Korean won. Any monies above that would be cash receipts and would have to be accounted for with a form called the Daily Cashier's Record.

The big safe was open, and the money was neatly arranged. With Freddy and the cashier standing there watching us, we counted it quickly. It was all there with the addition of the two hundred seventy-three dollars and eighty-five cents taken in by the bar and the six hundred forty-seven dollars taken in by the kitchen during the just completed lunch hour.

There was only one problem. Instead of fifteen hundred dollars' worth of won, the Korean operating bank had nineteen hundred seventy-five dollars' worth of won and the U.S. dollar operating bank was depleted by exactly four hundred seventy-five. It all balanced out, but they had too much Korean money and not enough U.S. money. And the difference was exactly the amount found in the big glass brandy snifter.

"You took up a collection, didn't you, Freddy?"

"Not me." Freddy put his hand to his chest and took a step out of the small office. "I don't know nothing about it."

"Or maybe you didn't want to know nothing about it."

"What the employees do with

their own money is up to them. I had nothing to do with it."

Ernie snorted.

Freddy turned and fled back to his office.

Talk about standing up for your staff.

The situation didn't look too serious. Apparently what had happened was that Miss Pei noticed that the football pool money was missing from the brandy snifter, informed the new assistant manager, and he told the chief of staff, who is also the head of the Club Council, about the missing money when he came in for lunch. The chief of staff, of course, got on the horn and told the C.I.D. to get down here right away. Hot stuff. Money missing from the army-navy football pool. Some of it his.

Meanwhile, Freddy and the club employees got wind of the situation and for some reason decided to take up a collection in won, the Korean currency; change it into U.S. dollars at the cashier's cage; and replace the money in the brandy snifter. Why they did this I didn't know. One reason could have been to keep the heat off the club. Those bar inventories looked too precise to account for normal human activity. Bartenders sometimes spill liquor or open the wrong can of beer, or a customer sends a drink back be-

cause it isn't what he ordered. Inventories shouldn't come out even, down to the last ounce of liquor and the last can of beer. Not real inventories. But when you're pulling a scam, you might decide to make everything balance out perfectly so you don't attract attention. So you won't have a couple of nosy C.I.D. agents wandering around your club.

Or maybe they had collected the money for some other reason. I didn't know. But most important, I couldn't figure who had stolen the money in the first place.

I looked at the cashier. "Who took the money out of the brandy snifter?"

She put her head down and stared at the floor. Slowly she began to shake her head. I tried again.

"Where did all this extra won come from? Did you take up a collection?"

Still she said nothing, as if she were tremendously ashamed, and just kept shaking her head.

I stood up. I knew I wasn't going to get anything here. Ernie stood up and threw his empty beer can into the wastebasket, and we walked out into the hallway.

Ernie said, "They're trying to cover something up."

I said, "You got that right."

Two cute young Korean girls,

bundled in sweaters and scarves, bounced down the hallway towards the main exit. Lunch hour waitresses, just heading home. I stopped them and spoke in Korean.

"Young lady. Who is the head of the union here?"

They both stopped abruptly, breathless and wide-eyed.

"Mr. Kwon. The bar manager."

I thanked them; they giggled and continued on their way.

Ernie looked after them. "Nice legs."

"That's all you could see of them."

"That was enough."

We wandered down the red carpeted hallway, took a couple of lefts, and found the bar manager's office. Mr. Kwon stood up when we walked in. He was a tall man for a Korean, close to six feet, maybe in his mid-fifties, and he had the scholarly air of someone who works with books and ledgers all the time. Not like most of the bartenders I was used to back in the States. He wore slacks and a white shirt with a black tie. His hair was oiled and combed straight back. I tried to imagine him in the white pantaloons and tunic of the ancient Korean with his hair long and knotted on the top. He looked like a Confucian scholar caught in modern times.

His eyes widened slightly.  
"Yes?"

"It's about the money you collected," I said, "to replace what was missing from behind the bar. Why?"

Mr. Kwon sighed and indicated the chairs against the wall across the small cubicle. "Have a seat," he said.

We sat. And waited.

"This morning when Miss Pei came to me and told me the money was missing, we decided to take up a collection and replace it."

"We?"

"The Korean employees here. It is not good to leave something shameful like the disappearance of money unattended to. This is our home. We take care of it."

"But Miss Pei had already told one of the Americans. The assistant manager."

"A mistake. We should not have bothered you about this matter."

"Who took the money?"

Mr. Kwon looked down for a second and then up at me. "The money is back now. There is no reason to worry about who took it."

"Maybe not. But I need to know. Otherwise, I won't know whether to worry or not."

"And besides," Mr. Kwon said, "now that the chief of staff is interested in this matter, you are

nervous and if you don't find out the truth it could be bad for you."

Bingo. I wasn't hardly admitting it to myself. If this had been the Enlisted Club and the money had been returned and none of the 8th Army honchos had known about it, I wouldn't have bothered to look any further. As it was, the first sergeant would be breathing fire if we didn't wrap this thing up.

Ernie jumped in. "Don't you worry about the chief of staff. You just tell us who stole that damn money."

Mr. Kwon looked at him steadily. "One of our waitresses stole it. Miss Lim."

Ernie said, "Why haven't you turned her in?"

"We will take care of it. Our own way."

There was something about this situation that was bothering me. If they had a bad apple among them who was embarrassing everybody by stealing the army-navy football pool money, I could understand their trying to get rid of her quietly in order to save face for the entire Korean staff. But what I couldn't understand was why they would donate their hard-earned money to cover for her. Their chances of getting their donations reimbursed were nil. So why not just admit the thievery, run her out of town, and for-

get it? Were they that embarrassed that they'd shell out cash to avoid the wrath of the 8th Army chief of staff? I knew I wouldn't. Of course, years of doing without in East L.A. had taught me to be somewhat parsimonious. But the Koreans had risen from the ashes of a devastating war less than two decades ago. They were even thriftier than I was. It didn't make sense.

"What is it about this Miss Lim," I said, "that makes you want to protect her?"

Mr. Kwon shifted in his seat and then looked back at me. Maybe he decided that we weren't going to give up so he might as well lay it on the table.

"We know why she stole the money," he said. "She had a baby and the baby is sick and she had to take it to the hospital."

"What about her husband?"

"She's not married."

I waited. Mr. Kwon continued.

"There was an officer here. Not a good man. I warned her. She stayed with him while he spent his year in Korea. He told her that he would divorce his wife and return for her and the baby. After he left for the States, he wrote to her maybe two or three times, sent her a little money, and then stopped writing. I've seen it many times. I've

seen many young Korean girls with their hopes too high. They are blinded by their love for the United States."

"Not their love for the GI?"

"No." Mr. Kwon's face didn't move.

Ernie pulled out a stick of chewing gum, unwrapped it, and after a few chomps got it clicking. He didn't believe that line any more than I did. Shooting for sympathy. With a half-American baby yet.

"Where does this Miss Lim live?"

Mr. Kwon sighed again. He lifted the phone on his desk, dialed, barked a question, and then wrote something on the notepad in front of him. After he hung up the phone, he ripped the paper off the pad and handed it to me.

"Do you read Korean?"

"If you write it clearly." It was an address.

"This is where Miss Lim lives?"

"Yes."

I thanked him; we stood up and left the room. He looked after us as we walked down the long hallway. Maybe it was his resigned manner. Maybe it was the ancient cast of his features. But something told me that he'd been through this before.

**U**nlike the lush gentility of the 8th Army compound, Itaewon was alive

with milling people and rows of produce, chickens, hogs, and fish wriggling in murky tanks. Miss Lim's alley was right off the Itaewon Market, but the noise of commerce shut off abruptly as we slid into the narrow walkway. Ten foot high brick and stone walls loomed over us. I checked the numbers on the gateways to the homes. They didn't seem to be in order, as if things had changed too much over the centuries for a simple one, two, three, four. Finally I found the gateway to 246-15 and pounded on a splintered wooden gate. Hens squawked as an old woman put on her slippers and shuffled towards us.

"Yoboseiyo?" she said.

"Miss Lim," I said. "We're looking for Miss Lim."

The old woman opened the door. Trusting. We were Americans, not thieves.

"*Ae Kyong ah!*" She called for someone. I thought it would be Miss Lim, but it turned out to be an interpreter. A woman, about thirty, in blue shorts and a red T-shirt emerged from her hooch.

"Are you Miss Lim?" I said.

"No. She went to the hospital. Her baby is very sick."

"Which hospital?"

She spoke to the old woman in rapid Korean and then turned back to me. "The MoBom Hospital in Hannam-dong."

"Which room does she live in?"

"The one on the end. There."

Ernie and I walked over. It was just a hovel. Raised foundation, little plastic closet in the corner, folded sleeping mats on a vinyl floor, and a small pot-bellied stove in the center of the room with rickety aluminum tubing reaching to the ceiling. An officer in dress greens stared at me out of a framed photograph. He looked in his mid-thirties, maybe twenty pounds over his fighting weight, with curly brown hair and a big jolly smile. Gold maple leaves on his shoulder glittered along with his white teeth.

I turned back to the women. "How long has Miss Lim been gone?"

"She came home from work late last night. The baby never stopped crying. She waited until the curfew was over and then left for the hospital."

"Before dawn?"

"Yes."

"And she's been there ever since?"

"Yes."

The old woman waited patiently, not understanding. I smiled at her, thanked them both, and we turned to go. The woman in the blue shorts and red T-shirt called after me.

"Hey!"

We stopped and turned around.

"Why you GI always make baby and then go?"

I didn't have an answer for her. Ernie stopped clicking his gum. We turned around and left.

The waiting room of the MoBom Hospital was packed. An attractive young Korean woman with a snappy white cap pinned to her black hair sat behind a counter near the entrance. Behind her was a list of basic fees. It was ten thousand won, up front, to see a doctor. Fourteen bucks.

I told her about Miss Lim and her sick baby and asked where we could find her. She thumbed through a ledger but kept shaking her head. She wanted to know Miss Lim's full name. I told her she was the woman with the half-American baby. She perked right up.

"Oh, yes. She is in Room 314. The stairway is over there."

The room held about thirty tiny beds with plastic siding on them. Miss Lim sat next to one of the tiny beds on a wooden chair, her face in her hands. I showed her my identification.

"Hello, Miss Lim. We're from the C.I.D."

It seemed that her face was about to burst with redness. She was a plain woman, young and

thin with a puffy face that looked even more bloated from crying.

"Is your baby going to be all right?"

"The doctor is not sure yet. I must wait."

Ernie didn't like it there. He fidgeted with the change in his pocket and then drifted back towards the door. My signal to wrap it up quickly.

"The money you took from behind the bar. It has already been replaced. I will talk to everyone. Explain your situation. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Her head went back into her hands, and this time she clutched her red face as if she were trying to bury it in her palms. I couldn't be sure, but I think her shoulders convulsed a couple of times. I looked down at the baby. It was scrawny. Unconscious. Sweat-soaked brown hair matted against its little head.

We left.

Neither one of us spoke as the sloe-eyed stares followed us out of the hospital.

Ernie zigzagged his jeep through the heavy Seoul traffic as if he were in a race to get away from the devil.

"Well," he said. "We wrapped up another one."

"I'm sure they won't do anything to her," I said. "I'll type up the report to make her look as

good as possible. Even the 8th Army chief of staff's got a heart."

Ernie didn't say anything. I turned to him.

"Right?"

He shrugged. "If you say so, pal."

The chief of staff didn't want to prosecute, but in his capacity as the president of the Officer's Club council he did demand that Miss Lim appear before the next board meeting and explain her actions. The word we got was that he was upset with her because she could have come to the Club Council any time and they would have helped her out. Thievery wasn't necessary, according to him.

When Ernie heard that, he snorted. "Nobody likes a person with a problem until that person has already solved the problem."

It also occurred to me that the Club Council had had years to set up a mechanism to help employees with emergency medical expenses, but they never had. Better to make them come begging for it.

We went to the Enlisted Club that night for Happy Hour and paid thirty-five cents for a tax free beer and forty cents for a shot of bourbon to go with it.

The stripper had eyes like a cat.

\* \* \*

"She was a real trouper," Freddy said. "Appeared before the Club Council looking sharp, standing up straight, and didn't bat an eye when they told her that she'd been suspended for thirty days."

"How have the other Korean employees taken it?"

"The place has been like a morgue. They do their jobs all right, but they won't look at me and they won't say anything. The laughter's gone around here."

"It'll come back." Freddy looked skeptical, but I knew it would.

I'd learned that in East L.A.

At first the Korean National Police Liaison Officer tried to keep it from us but Yongsan Compound is like a small town in the huge metropolis of Seoul and word spreads quickly. Especially amongst the MP's and the C.I.D.

Ernie didn't chew any gum on the way out to Itaewon, and he drove carefully.

Neighbors clogged the narrow alleyway leading to Miss Lim's hooch, but we pushed our way through them and flashed our I.D.'s to the uniformed Korean policeman at the gate. Captain Chong, commander of the Itaewon Police Box, was there. He

didn't say anything when we stepped to the front of the room.

The baby looked pretty much the way I'd seen her before. Thin. Still. But she wasn't sweating any more. She lay on the vinyl floor as if she'd rolled away from her mother's bosom. Miss Lim's mouth was wide open and so were her eyes. They were white. Without pupils.

When I turned around, Cap-

tain Chong was standing right behind us.

"Carbon monoxide poisoning," he said.

I looked at the aluminum tubing above the heater. There was a hole in it, as if someone had punctured the thin metal with a knife and twisted.

The photograph of the brown-haired major lay face up on the floor. Smiling at me.

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# The Witch of Wilton Falls

## by Gloria Ericson

**A**s I scanned the rest of my mail, I absentmindedly opened the one letter my secretary had left sealed, thinking it might be personal. Absorbed as I was, I failed to notice the return address, so its message came as rather a shock: *Since we could find no evidence of next-of-kin, and you seemed to be her only correspondent and visitor, we thought you would want to know that Miriam Winters passed away quietly in her sleep on the 25th.*

The sun pouring through the Venetian blinds of my office seemed suddenly chilled. I had been standing while I opened the letter, but now I sat, swung the big leather chair around, and gazed out the window. So she had died—at last. *Her only visitor.* I wasn't even that. When was the last time I had seen her—five years ago? Six? I remembered receiving a card from her this past Christmas and making sure Meg sent one in return. How lonely she must have been these last years. Suddenly I was filled with the worst kind of remorse—the kind you feel when someone's gone and it's too late to make up any neglect.

I was only a kid, no more than sixteen, when they let Old Man Winters out and, since I was the one responsible for his release, I went around that summer swaggering like a damn hero. It wasn't until later that I came to think differently of myself. I haven't been back to Wilton Falls in a good many years, and I wonder if they still tell their kids and their grandchildren about that summer. I wonder if they still tell it the wrong way, too—making Miriam Winters out to be some sort of witch. Well, they're wrong. She wasn't a witch. I talked to her enough later (*too late*) to know.

Swinging my chair back to the desk, I looked at the letter again. It was strange, but I was probably the only living person who had ever heard the full details of her side of the story. Certainly the newspapers had never given her her due. They were too busy making sensational copy out of the horror she had perpetrated—and it *was* horror. I have never denied that, or condoned what she did, but it was my fate to get a more rounded picture than anyone else, and so I always have felt differently about Miriam Winters. . . .

\* \* \*

Miriam stopped to wipe the perspiration from her brow. There were two more shirts to iron. Harry was due home tonight, and he'd ask about them first thing. He had a lot of shirts, enough to last him four weeks on the road while an equal number were being done up at home. A salesman had to be well-groomed, Harry always said. Still, it seemed that he took more shirts than necessary. Miriam, after her first blunder, never mentioned it when she found lipstick or powder smudges on any of them.

She looked fearfully at the clock over the kitchen sink. Why had she waited until the last minute? Well, it had been a difficult month. Bobby had been sick, and then she'd had so many of those awful headaches. Ever since Harry had knocked her against the stove the last time he'd been home, she had been bothered by the headaches and that funny confused feeling that came over her from time to time. She put down the iron and rubbed her head. She didn't mind the headaches so much, but worried about the confused feeling. She wondered if she blacked out at such times and fervently hoped not. Bobby was pretty self-sufficient for a four-year-old, but who could tell what he would do if he found his mother unconscious someday?

Fortunately she had just put the final touches on the last shirt when she heard Harry's car drive into the old barn behind the house. He came banging in—a big man, a good twenty years older than Miriam—set down his luggage without an answer to her quavering "hello," and went out again. He returned with a couple of paper bags which he carefully placed on the kitchen table. Miriam's heart sank. It hadn't been a good trip, then. She could always tell by the amount of whisky he brought back with him to ease the few days' rest at home before he started off again.

"I have your supper all ready," said Miriam, poking at the pots on the stove.

Harry, fussing with the seal on one of the whisky bottles, stopped only long enough to glare at her. "My shirts done?"

"Yes—oh, yes—all of them. Now just you sit down and I'll dish out your supper."

He grunted and seated himself heavily at the wooden table.

Two hours later he was wildly drunk.

He would not allow her to go to bed, and although she was able to avoid his drunken lunges for a while, he finally had her backed into a corner. The whisky fumes of his breath and the feel of his

fumbling hands at her clothes sickened her. "No, no, H-Harry . . ." Her voice involuntarily rose in a crescendo.

Then there were other hands plucking at her, and she looked down at Bobby. Aroused by the noise, he had come weeping into the kitchen. "Mama, Mama," he said, trying to pull her away.

Miriam swallowed and tried to speak calmly. "You must go back to bed, Bobby. Come, I'll take you."

But Harry held her firm. "You'll do no such thing. You can just stop being the damn mother for once. When a man comes home from the road he wants a little comfort—a little wifely comfort." Then to the child, who still clung, "G'wan, dammit. Get to bed."

But the weeping child did not move, and swift as lightning the big hand of the man swung out. The body of the small boy seemed to fly through the air before landing in a crumpled heap at the base of the sink. From the gash on the forehead blood spurted first, then flowed in a horrible red sheet down the face of the child. His mouth opened but no sound came out.

Even Harry seemed stunned by the sight and made no move to stop Miriam as she tore from his arms with a strange animal-like sound. The child's breath had come back, and his sobs mingled with hers as she rocked him in her arms and sponged at his face with a wet dish towel. There was no hope of outside help in this emergency, for there was no phone and Harry was too drunk to drive to a doctor. The house itself was isolated, situated as it was on the edge of a meadow. Beyond that stretched a wooded area. The nearest neighbor, Miriam knew, was at least a mile away.

Finally, thankfully, the flow of blood lessened and then stopped. As Miriam gently swabbed her son's head, she noted how wide the gash was and how frighteningly near his eye. Tomorrow morning she would have a doctor look at it, but now bed, probably, was the best therapy. She picked the child up and went past Harry, who had again settled himself at the table, silently drinking. She improvised a clumsy bandage, and tucked the still faintly sobbing child in bed. He did not want her to go, so she sat on the edge of the bed until, with a last convulsive shudder, he allowed himself to be overtaken by sleep.

She went quietly back to the kitchen. Harry had succumbed finally, and sat sprawled at the table, his head on his arms. Miriam shook him, but when he did not respond, she went to the knife drawer and selected the largest, sharpest knife she had. She shut

the drawer and went and stood behind her husband, hefting the knife, gauging the angle of thrust that would be best . . .

It was odd. Her role in life up to this minute had been that of follower. She was ever stumbling after some stronger-willed person, often hating it but never knowing how to break away; indecisive. That's why it was odd that suddenly she should know just what to do. She didn't have to agonize over her decision or consult someone else. Harry must be done away with. It was *right*. She *knew* it.

What stayed her hand, then?

A haunting phrase from her childhood Sunday school: *Thou shalt not kill*? An awareness of how difficult it would be to dispose of a dead body? Perhaps. But more probably it was the sudden image that flashed across her mind, an image of herself behind bars and Bobby alone. Murderers were always caught, weren't they? She had made no plans to cover her "crime," nor had she any belief that even if she did, the police wouldn't find out sooner or later. She was not *that* clever—merely right.

Slowly she lowered her hand. Perhaps she could not kill Harry, but he must be restrained in some way—the thing tonight was too close. Miriam shivered as she recalled the bloodied face of her child. No, just as wild beasts must be killed or locked up . . .

Locked up? She thought a moment. Of course. That was the answer. The big old house with its large expanse of fenced-in grounds had been purchased less than a year ago from former kennel owners. They had been breeders of Great Danes, as a matter of fact, and in the cavernous cellar one area had been sectioned off with sturdy cyclone fencing set in concrete. The area was about nine by nine feet, with the fencing extending even across the top. This "cage" had been used for whelping bitches and their puppies. Harry in such a cage would never be able to hurt Bobby or herself again.

She stared at Harry's bulk. Tomorrow she would wonder how she had been able to drag such a heavy man across the kitchen, down the cellar steps, and into the cage, but tonight she merely knew that it must be done.

Harry stirred and moaned once or twice in the tortuous journey but never fully awakened from his drunken stupor. Perspiration trickled down Miriam's back and between her breasts, and by the time she had hauled her unconscious husband into the caged area she was wringing wet. A wooden platform, raised a few inches from

the floor, took up a portion of the cage. Apparently the dogs had slept on this. Miriam went upstairs and dragged two blankets from their bed and threw them in on the platform. Then she closed the cage door. There was a heavy padlock on the latch. She clicked it shut. She had no key for it, but that did not matter because she did not expect to open it again—ever.

The first few days were terribly noisy, of course. It was fortunate the house was so isolated or surely Harry's bellows of disbelief, anger, and frustration would have been heard. Miriam took Bobby to the doctor the next day to have his wound attended. The doctor was aghast and wanted to know why she hadn't come when it happened, and how *did* it happen?

"He fell against the latch of the sink cabinet last night and it would have been too difficult to come all this way on foot in the dark. My husband isn't home with the car." Miriam lied, confident that Bobby would not refute her story, and he did not. He was a quiet, obedient child, solemn beyond his years.

When they returned from the doctor's, they could hear Harry's shrieks of rage as they walked in the door. Bobby shrank against his mother. Miriam sat down on the straight chair near the door and took her son onto her lap. "Listen, Bobby, you mustn't let those noises in the cellar bother you. It's only . . ." She paused a moment, suddenly thinking of a different approach. "You remember those fairy tales we were reading the other night?"

Bobby nodded.

"Do you remember the one about the prince being turned into a frog?"

"Yes . . ."

"Well, something like that has happened, I think, to your father. He has been turned into a bear, a great shaggy bear, as punishment, I imagine, for not—for not being more kind. Well, anyway, he's in a cage in the cellar so he cannot hurt us."

Bobby's eyes were round. A particularly loud bellow rose from below at this point, and the child trembled. "He—he c-can't get out . . ." he quavered.

"No." Miriam's voice was firm. "He absolutely can't get out—and after a while he'll probably stop making so much noise." She slid the child from her lap and stood up. Then she added, "By the way, Bobby, you mustn't tell *anybody* at *all* about this, or they will make us let him out."

Glancing down at him, she saw his eyes widen with horror at

the thought. She smoothed down her dress, satisfied. Bobby would never tell.

Miriam allowed three days to pass before she went down to Harry. He was lying down, seemingly exhausted by three days of shouting, but at her approach he sprang up and clutched with trembling fingers at the heavy cage meshing. Miriam stopped a few feet from the cage and set down on the floor the plate of food and shallow bowl of milk she was carrying. Then, as if repeating something she had rehearsed many times, she picked up a broom that lay nearby and shoved first the plate and then the bowl toward the "gate" of the cage, which cleared the floor by about three inches.

Harry's lips twitched. "All right, you, what's this all about?"

She did not answer but continued to shove the food toward him.

Harry's voice was shrill. "Dammit, Miriam, let me out! Miriam—Miriam, do you hear me . . ." His voice became uncertain. Her silence seemed to unnerve him. Was this the same woman whom he had browbeaten so long? The same woman who had heretofore quaked at his every command? He tried again, a conciliatory tone suddenly in his voice. "Listen, Miriam, I admit you may have a beef. Look, I know I had too much to drink, but you can't keep me locked up here forever, can you?"

She answered him then. She straightened up and looked with her unblinking clear blue eyes into his. "Yes," she said.

He was taken aback. "W-What?"

"Yes," she repeated. "I can keep you locked up forever. I can and I must." She indicated the food with her foot. The two dishes were half under the gate. "Here's some food. I'll bring you more tomorrow night." Then she turned and started up the stairs.

He was apparently shocked into silence for a moment, but then an outraged bellow of venomous anger escaped him. "You'll never be able to get away with it, Miriam!" he screamed. "People'll find out. Don't you realize, you idiot, you can't get away with something like this. You'll be arrested . . ."

The young woman on the stairs continued ascending as if she heard nothing. At the top she switched off the cellar light and shut the door carefully, quietly, behind her.

Every evening she took him food, seldom speaking herself, letting his increasingly hysterical screams of abuse cascade over her with no comment. When the stench in the cage became unbearable she employed the same means of cleaning it the former kennel owners apparently had used. She coupled a hose on a nearby spigot

and hosed off the cage floor, the water and filth easily channeling themselves into the slight gully in the cement floor outside the cage. The gully led to an open drain in the floor, and this she kept sanitary by a periodic sprinkling with disinfecting powder. Several times a week she also slid a shallow basin of soapy water in to him so that he might clean himself if he wished.

As the weeks passed, Harry's vilification, his threats, became less. He tried a new tack. It was just a matter of time, he assured her. His company would be checking up soon. And, anyway, how long did she think she could hold out by herself? How would she live? How would she earn money? If his questions did not seem to disconcert her, it was only because she had given those same questions great thought herself.

For instance, Miriam had already telephoned Harry's company. She was sorry, she told them, but her husband had taken another job and wished to terminate his employment with them. As Harry had never been one of their better salesmen, they were not overly upset. Fine, they said, they wished him luck, but would he please send back his sample case and stock book. Miriam said she'd see that they were in the mail that day, and they were. Thus the company, which the man in the cage so desperately counted on to start a hullabaloo over his disappearance, quietly washed its hands of him.

The weeks immediately following Harry's incarceration were idyllic ones for Miriam and Bobby. They went to the nearby fields to pick wild strawberries, they frolicked in the woods. Never had Miriam been so happy. Her childhood had consisted of one indifferent foster home after another. Her marriage to Harry, which she had thought would be an escape, had merely had the effect of putting her in a new foster home with a new foster parent—and a more brutal one, at that. But now she was free—free for the first time in her life. Even her headaches and that confused feeling seemed to be bothering her less. In the fall Bobby would be starting school, and she must then consider her future. Harry's remarks about her inability to support herself were not lost on her, but there was enough money in the savings account for the present, and she was determined not to worry about anything until the fall.

In the fall her decision not to worry was completely justified because things fell into place beautifully for her. Old Mrs. Jenkins, the town librarian, died, and Miriam, ever a lover of books, applied for the position. There were few applicants for the job, and Miriam,

although a comparative newcomer to town, made by far the best appearance. She was quiet, neat, and seemingly conscientious. Also, her implication that her salesman husband had abandoned her didn't hurt her chances. If anything, it aroused the town board's sympathies, and they gave her the job. The position didn't pay much, but Miriam's wants were few: merely enough money to maintain Bobby and herself and to feed the "Shaggy Bear" in the basement. The latter epithet had become particularly appropriate, for Harry had grown quite a beard and there were times when Miriam had difficulty recognizing the shaggy lumbering creature in the cage as her husband—so much difficulty that she soon stopped trying. He was merely the "Bear" who must be fed nightly and ignored as much as possible the rest of the time.

Ignoring him became more difficult during the winter months, for a change came over him. Until then he had been an abusive, vilifying creature, shaking the cage mesh violently, slamming his metal dishes around, screaming deprecations upon her head. But one night she went down with his food to find him holding onto the mesh and whimpering. He saw her, and a great tear rolled down his cheek and glistened on the rough beard. It was followed by others. The Bear was crying! "Miriam, Miriam," it sobbed.

How strange that a bear should know her name. But then, she must remember, it really was Harry in that bear suit.

"Miriam, please—please set me free. I know I haven't been good to you, but I promise I'll go away and never bother you again. Just set me free . . ." Great sobs shook the creature's frame.

Miriam felt tears well up in her own eyes. She was a sensitive person and could feel great sympathy for this caged creature. Carefully she set the dishes down for the Bear. "I'm sorry," she said softly before turning back to the stairs.

That night she had difficulty sleeping. What sadness there was in the world! How sorry she felt for that poor Bear. If only there were something she could do to ease his unrest, but of course there wasn't. Many was the time in the years to come that she had to remind herself that, sorry as she was for the Bear, there was nothing she could do about it, really.

Bobby, destined to grow up in such an unusual household, knew without asking that he must never bring boys home from school to play with him. His friends soon came to accept this eccentricity, just as the townspeople came to accept the fact that their sweet-faced librarian, although friendly enough at the library, lived a

rather hermit-like existence with her son, and never asked anyone to visit.

Surely Bobby could not have long believed the father-turned-into-a-bear story. There must have come a day when curiosity overcame him and he peeked into one of the cellar windows. While still quite young, he may have been fooled by the sight of the shaggy creature, thinking it really was a bear, even as his mother had come to think of it as a bear. But as he grew older he must have looked again and known, and knowing, what could he do? Go to the police? Have his father, whom he only dimly remembered as a bellowing brute, freed? And where would his gentle mother be sent? To a jail—to a madhouse? No, no. He did not know—could not afford to know—what was in the cellar.

However slowly the years may have passed for the Bear, they passed quickly enough for Miriam and Bobby. Grammar school. High school. *War!* War was in the air. Hitler was marching through Czechoslovakia . . . Poland . . . Then Pearl Harbor. Bobby enlisted the next day in the navy. He kissed his mother's tearstained face and hugged her comfortingly. It would all be over soon, now that he was in it, he said to make her smile, but she did not smile. Her whole life was leaving.

Miriam told the Bear about it that evening. Over the years she had developed the habit of sitting outside the cage in an old rocking chair in the evenings when Bobby was at a basketball game or at some other school activity. She enjoyed chatting with the Bear—now that he had learned not to talk about the possibility of his freedom and instead quietly listened to her tell of things in the outside world: Bobby's athletic exploits, incidents at the library, and so on. It was quite cosy, really. She had placed an old floor lamp next to the rocker and sometimes she would read aloud from books she brought home from the library. The Bear seemed to appreciate that. This evening, when she told him of Bobby's leaving, he seemed most sympathetic.

"Miriam," he said, his voice rusty with disuse, "I let me out now. Let me take care of you while Bobby's away."

She looked at him, stunned. After all this time and he still didn't understand—still could bring that up! Sorrowfully she got up from the rocker, snapped off the lamp, and started up the stairs. At the top she shut the door quietly but firmly on his pleadings. After all these years he still didn't understand that you don't let wild beasts loose. No matter how sorry you feel for the lions and tigers in the

zoos and no matter how tame they seem, you just don't go around letting them loose on society.

Soon there were long newsy letters from Bobby, which she read to the Bear at night. (He had apparently learned his lesson after his last outburst and had become more docile and quiet than ever.) It didn't seem long at all before Bobby was home on his first leave, healthy, bronzed, wonderful to look at. Miriam wished the Bear could see him.

Bobby used his leave to good advantage, too, by painting the house and making other repairs that were needed. The morning before he left he stood staring out the kitchen window. Miriam went over to him, and he looked down at her thoughtfully. "Mom, I noticed some kids cutting across the back lot yesterday. The fencing must be down back there."

Miriam nodded. "I dare say. After all, it's pretty old fencing."

Bobby shifted his weight and frowned. "I don't like it—kids cutting across the property. I'm going to town today and get some new posts and barbed wire."

He worked all that day and until it was time for him to leave the next evening. He came in hot and sweaty, but looking satisfied. "I put 'No Trespassing' signs up and strung the fencing real tight. I'd like to see any kid get through all those strands of barbed wire." He came over and put his arm around his mother. "It'll be good for years, Mom. Long after I come back . . ."

But he didn't come back. She was at the library when the telegram arrived. Everyone was terribly kind. There were offers of lifts home, but she refused them all, preferring to walk the two miles by herself—the last mile over the now overgrown private road that led to her house. She did not break down until she had sought out the Bear, and then she slumped down on the cold cement outside his cage and sobbed over and over, "Bobby's gone, Bear; Bobby's gone." Through the heavy wire mesh the claw-like fingers with the unclipped nails pushed, as if trying to stroke her. Tears rolled down the shaggy beard, but whether the Bear was shedding tears over the loss of his son or over the futility of his own life is not known.

Life goes on. By spring Miriam had come to accept with a kind of dull resignation Bobby's passing. She continued her job at the library, of course, for without Bobby's allotment check she was again the sole support of herself and the Bear. Bobby's insurance



BUT HE DIDN'T COME BACK. SHE WAS AT THE LIBRARY WHEN THE TELEGRAM ARRIVED. . . .

money she did not touch. Someday she might be unable to work and would need it.

The days in the old house at the end of the overgrown road established themselves in a seldom-varying pattern. The Bear had become quite trustworthy, and on weekends when the weather was nice Miriam even dared open from the outside the small window over his cage. It gave her much pleasure to see him rouse himself from his usual slump on the wooden platform and stand directly under the open window, inhaling great breaths of fresh air. Sometimes he would suddenly fling his arms up but then as suddenly drop them as they contacted the meshing on the top of his cage. Sometimes he rose on tiptoes as if straining to see out, but of course he could not. Often she brought him bouquets of flowers picked from the meadow, and he seemed to like that, burying his face in the blooms and sniffing hungrily. She was glad to do these things, for she had become quite fond of him, really, and more and more her prime concern in life became his comfort and contentment.

The years, one by one, passed slowly, quietly by. There were a few times of crisis, of course—the time the Bear was so sick, for instance. It was sheer torture for Miriam to listen to him call out hoarsely for a doctor and know that she could not possibly get one. She could do nothing but pray, and eventually her prayers were answered. The Bear stopped sweating and moaning, finally, and began to get better. Then there was the time she herself was sick. It was one summer during her vacation. She was too ill to go to the doctor and had no way to summon him to the house, nor would it have been advisable for her to do so even if she could for, as keeper, she was in a sense as much a prisoner as the Bear. The fever raged through her for several days and the only thing that kept her from succumbing was the distant sound of the Bear's plaintive calls. It would be so easy just to let go and die, but she could not. The Bear was hungry—needed her . . . So she fought, and lived to see the Bear fall upon the food she finally weakly brought to him. It was worth the fight.

Perhaps the worst time of all was when the pan of hot grease caught fire in the kitchen. With frantic efforts she managed to put it out, scorching her arms quite badly in the process. It was not the pain in her arms that left her trembling, though, but the thought of what might have happened had the fire spread. The Bear would have been trapped, burned alive. The thought left her weak. She wracked her brain for a solution to the possibility of

such a thing's happening again, and suddenly remembered that Harry, her former husband (she had not thought of him in years), had owned a revolver. She went upstairs and found it in an old cupboard. She felt much better. This way the Bear was assured of a quick, merciful death.

The time the furnace broke down required even more ingenuity on her part, and the coffee she offered the Bear at that time was heavily laced with sleeping pills. When he fell into a deep, drugged sleep she threw dropcloths over the cage, ranged discarded furniture against it, and called the repairmen. The men worked for an hour over the furnace, completely unaware that within a few feet of them a creature, once-man, slept.

And the years ticked on . . .

I was kind of at loose ends that summer I was sixteen, anyway. Having lost my mother and father in an automobile accident only a few months before, I was spending some time with my grandfather in his "hunting shack" at Wilton Falls. My grandfather was a judge downstate and normally used the shack only once or twice in the fall for hunting, but this year he had taken time off in the early summer and come up with me. Guess he thought some fishing and general rambling in the woods would be good for me; get my mind off my loss.

I was out in the woods by myself that day, though, when I came across the rusted barbed wire that surrounded the Winters place. I tested it with my foot and it gave way. Nimblly I leaped over the broken strands and soon found myself in a choked meadow, on the edge of which perched a weatherbeaten Victorian house. I regarded the apparition with surprise. Was it occupied? Probably not; much too neglected-looking. I sauntered over to observe more closely, and then bent to peer through one of the cellar windows. The cellar was quite dark and it was a moment before my eyes accustomed themselves to the feeble light. Almost directly under the window there was a cagelike arrangement, with a hulking shape in one corner. A shadow? No, it seemed to move, and suddenly I was looking at a matted tangle of hair, out of which stared the deadliest, most vacant eyes I had ever seen. My heart gave a sickening lurch. What I was seeing was impossible. I stayed a moment longer, as if riveted by those terrible dead-man eyes. Then the shaggy head turned away and I was released—released to run across the sunny unreal meadow, over the broken strands of barbed wire that tore at my

clothes, through the adjoining woods. I had slowed down somewhat by the time I reached my grandfather's cabin and was a little ashamed of myself. After all, I was no kid—ye gods, I was sixteen—and here I was running like a scared rabbit. Then the memory of those eyes returned in full force and I felt cold sweat pop out all over me.

My grandfather, looking strangely unjudgelike in his plaid shirt and denim pants, was fussing at the stove when I came in. "Hello there," he said. "I was wondering where you were. Lunch is almost ready."

I stood, my back against the door, still breathing hard. "Gramp," I said, and there was, despite myself, a quiver in my voice.

My grandfather looked up then. His glance sharpened. "Something the matter, son? You look upset."

I tried to wave my hand deprecatingly but failed in that gesture, too. "Gramp, who lives in that big old house at the edge of the meadow?"

My grandfather frowned. "At the edge of the meadow . . . Oh, you must mean Mrs. Winters' place. Why?"

"I was just over there now and I saw—"

"Over there? That place is posted. You shouldn't have gone there."

"But the fencing is all rusted and I didn't see any No Trespassing signs . . . "

"Well, maybe the signs are too weathered to read any more, but everyone around here knows it's posted."

"Well, I didn't know, and I looked in one of the cellar windows. Gramp, there's something in a big cage there. A—A man, I think it is . . . "

My grandfather pulled out a chair and seated himself at the table. "Now, let's hear this from the beginning. What are you talking about—a cage, and a man—you-think in it?"

I told him the whole thing, but I could see he wasn't convinced.

"You're sure your eyes, and imagination, weren't playing tricks on you, son? I mean, everyone knows Mrs. Winters lives there all by herself. She's had a very tragic life, actually. First her husband abandoned her and she had to bring up their son all alone. Then he was killed in the war. I wouldn't want any wild rumors circulated by a grandson of mine to hurt her."

"But it's no wild rumor, Gramp, it's *true*. Please, Gramp, you've got to go look yourself."

I guess the urgency in my voice decided him. He stood up. "Okay. Best to squelch this now. You'll see it was just your imagination . . ."

By nightfall all Wilton Falls was in a state of shock. The police had sawed off the old padlock and led a stumbling, half-blind Harry Winters into the fresh air of freedom, and the town's gentle middle-aged librarian had been taken into "protective custody." She did not seem to mind. Her only concern seemed to be that "The Bear" be taken care of. When assured that he would be, she went along docilely enough. Actually, both of them were taken to the county hospital for observation—but to different wings.

How the town did buzz the next couple of weeks. The story made even the downstate papers with a banner headline: HUSBAND KEPT IN CAGE 30 YEARS BY WIFE. Under my picture it said: *He dared to look in the Witch's dungeon.* Under Mr. Winters' picture it said: *Caged like a beast for 30 of his 75 years.* And under Mrs. Winters' picture: *The Witch of Wilton Falls—She turned her husband into a "Bear."* It was all pretty heady stuff for me, being hero-of-the-hour, as it were. But then I looked more closely at the pictures of Mr. and Mrs. Winters and suffered my first feeling of disquietude. They both had the look of puzzled children on their faces as they were led away.

Miriam Winters, of course, was sent to the state mental hospital, but deciding what to do with Harry Winters was more of a problem. The county psychiatrists had difficulty testing him due to his refusal (or was it *inability*?) to talk, and finally came to the frustrated conclusion that although his mind had undoubtedly been affected by his imprisonment, he was harmless enough, and could be released to proper care. But what was "proper care"? There was a great outcry against sending him to the county home, for it was felt that in the few years that were left to him he deserved to be "free." The public conscience was stirred on this point and it was finally arranged that the old man go back to his own house. A volunteer committee of townspeople was set up in which one member every day would check on the old man, bring him groceries, take away laundry, etc. Part of the volunteers' duties included "socializing"—but that aspect was dropped as soon as it became evident that Harry Winters had no desire to chat with anybody.

Just what did Harry Winters' freedom mean to him after all those years? I found out, unfortunately, one hot August night about six weeks after his reinstatement in his old home. I had been into

town and decided to take a shortcut past the old Winters place on the way back. As I approached the house, I noted that it was unlighted except for a faint glow from the cellar windows. I recalled rumors I had heard in town. Nothing in the house ever seemed disturbed, they said—even the bed not slept in. Could it be that after all these years Harry Winters only felt comfortable sleeping in his cage and returned there each night?

Stealthily I crept up to a cellar window and peered in. In the dim light I could make out the outlines of the cage. Next to it was the rocking chair that Miriam Winters had used, but it was a moment before I realized that the hulking shape nearby was Harry Winters himself. He was sitting on the floor with his chin resting on one of the rocker's arms. There was a familiarity about the scene which I could not at first place, but then it came to me. In my grandfather's house there was a large painting in one of the bedrooms called *The Shepherd's Chief Mourner*. It showed a large dog mournfully resting his chin on the draped coffin of a deceased shepherd, his master. The sudden analogy between that painting and the tableau below sent a shaft of pain to my heart. I could not stand to see more, but as I prepared to rise, the mourning hulk suddenly moved. The shaggy head raised up, the throat arched, the mouth opened, and from it rose a cry of such utter anguish, such complete despair, that my hands flew instinctively to my ears to shut it out. But I could not shut it out. Again and again it came—a cry of longing—the longing of a tame bear for its gentle keeper.

I ran then. Even as I had once fled over a sun-choked meadow, now I flew over a moon-silvered one. This time, too, I was chased by horror, but this time the horror was of my own making and I knew I would never be able to outrun it.

They found Harry Winters the next morning in his cage—dead. His heart had given out, they said.

It was after my grandfather and I went downstate that I began to have the nightmares, though. Perhaps I cried out during them, because one morning at breakfast Grandfather remarked quietly, "I hope you don't feel guilty about reporting Miriam Winters, son. It *had* to be done."

I nodded my head. "Yes, I know . . ."

My lack of conviction must have shown, for my grandfather became emphatic. "It's time we laid this ghost away," he said. "You and I are going to the state mental hospital to see Miriam Winters."

Although I went reluctantly, the visit turned out to be surpris-

ingly pleasant. Miriam was delighted to have company and chatted cheerfully. She had heard that the Bear was dead, which was sad, but then, she added philosophically, he was pretty old. She knew that if he became sick again she would have to put him to sleep permanently anyway.

My grandfather looked at me pointedly at this revelation. Surely I needed no more proof that we had done the right thing in reporting the Winters affair. From his standpoint the visit was a success, but in a way it backfired, for Miriam was a kindly, warmhearted woman. She said I made her think of her son Bobby, and she hoped I'd come to see her again. To my own amazement I found myself promising I would.

And I did, many times. Was it my way of assuaging the faint guilt I still felt over disrupting the Winters couple's strangely compatible life together? I don't know, but I do know that in chatting with her I gradually learned the full story of the events leading to Harry Winters' imprisonment.

I went to my grandfather. "She shouldn't be in a mental institution," I complained. "She's not really insane, except of course about the 'Bear,' and he probably caused that insanity, beating her and all . . ."

My grandfather stared at me and sighed. "That ghost is still not laid, hmmm?" He thought a moment. "The county home in Wilton Falls is a well-run place. I'll see what I can do."

Miriam was transferred to the county home three weeks later, and I felt more at peace than I had for a long time. I still went to see her, but less frequently, as it was a longer run up to Wilton Falls. Then I went away to college—later began working—got married—moved farther away. Visits became replaced by letters, letters by a Christmas card, and now . . .

I looked down at the letter in my hand. Now there would not even be any need for that. Miriam Winters had paid her debt to society, and presumably society was satisfied. I now knew that, for my part, could I but relive that long-ago summer day, this time I would stare into the almost-blind eyes of Harry Winters and go quietly on my way.

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# Day of the Moon

by William Jeffrey

**F**lagg leaned against the crowbar until the hasp broke and the lock dropped to the pine-needled ground. He waited, listening, but the only sounds were the faint rippling of the mountain stream a hundred yards to the west, and the distant call of an owl in the surrounding woods. It was almost four A.M.

After a long moment, Flagg kicked the lock away, put the crowbar against the wall, and edged the door open. The light from the three-quarter moon illuminated nothing more than vague shadows in the black interior. Once he had stepped inside and pulled the door shut behind him, he took a small pen-flash from the pocket of his deer hunter's jacket and clicked it on.

He was in the rear storage room of Barney's Oasis, a roadside tavern set into a conifer grove which was ringed by tourist cabins. It was a box-shaped, clapboard building with a slant-shingled roof and a falsely rustic facade. Flagg had seen dozens just like it in the past two weeks, and he had begun to wonder if they were all put out from some master mold.

He moved deeper into the storage room, playing the flash. Along the near wall were cases of liquor and beer and quinine water, and along the far wall cartons of peanuts, potato chips, pretzels, and assorted other light snacks. He checked the liquor cases, opening one or two at random, and then went to a bank of shelves near the entrance to the bar proper. Soap, disinfectant, cloth towels—there was no sign of what he was looking for. He opened the door and stepped into the bar.

The barnlike room was bathed in the eerie, reddish-tinged shine of the neon beer signs in the long front window. Flagg glanced curiously at the scattered wooden tables with their matching chairs, and at the glitter-decorated musicians' dais. Then he turned and went behind the long polished bar on his left.

The planking squeaked beneath his canvas shoes as he moved slowly along the back-bar. When he reached the well where the house bourbon was located he picked up the bottle of Old Pilgrim from which he had been served just before the two A.M. closing. He removed the

*Baumann '91*

HE CONTINUED TO PEER DOWN INTO THE GROTTO FOR ANOTHER FULL MINUTE.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK  
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pour spout and sniffed briefly at the neck. Then, for reaffirmation, he tilted the bottle to his lips and allowed a small amount of the liquor to wet his tongue. It was the same: sour, yeasty, very young—not at all of the high quality for which the brand was widely renowned.

Flagg examined the bottle carefully. The glass had a few small flaws, but it was generally a skillful replica of the genuine Old Pilgrim decanter. Only an expert such as Flagg could have told the difference. The label had been well made, from good engraving plates, but the manufacturer's code was incorrect and the paper was of a cheaper quality than the high rag content of the real ones; too, the green of the ink had a slight yellowish cast that should not have been present. The federal tax stamp had a set of perforations that revealed it to be an obvious forgery.

He replaced the bottle. Now, at least, he had something definite to go on. If he could only locate—

The overhead lights suddenly blazed on.

Flagg whirled, crouching, his hand flashing inside the deer hunter's jacket. But he let it freeze there when he saw the tall blonde girl standing in the storage room doorway. She was dressed in a pair of bluejeans

and a plaid jacket, and she had a small, light deer rifle cradled in her hands. The muzzle was pointed at his belly.

She said, "Oh, so it's you," as if she were very disappointed. "You're the last person I would have figured for a night prowler."

Flagg relaxed, straightening up. The girl worked at Barney's Oasis as a waitress, and he had been making small talk with her only a couple of hours ago. Her name was Terry Kenyon. "I thought you'd be long gone home by this time," he said.

"I live in one of the cabins out there," she told him coldly. "I couldn't sleep, so I decided to take a walk. And I saw you fooling around at the rear door."

"So you went home and got your rifle," Flagg said. "Well, all right, you can put it down now."

"The hell I can."

He took a couple of short, exploratory steps forward. "Take it easy," he said. "This isn't what it looks like."

"No?"

"No. I can explain."

"You can do your explaining to the sheriff."

Flagg laughed. "That's pretty funny."

Her soft red mouth tightened. "I'm glad you think so."

"You're not going to call the sheriff."

"And why not?"

"Because you don't want him nosing around here," Flagg said. "Not with this place pushing moon."

"What?"

"You heard me. Moonshine. Bootleg liquor."

"You're crazy," Terry said incredulously. "That kind of thing went out with Prohibition."

"No," Flagg said. "Illicit liquor traffic is heavier than ever, all across the country. It's a multimillion dollar industry."

"Well, I don't—"

Flagg took two quick shuffling steps forward and jerked the rifle out of her hands. She made a small cry, her eyes widening. He backed off, holding the weapon crooked in his right arm.

She was frightened now. "What are you going to do?"

"That depends on you."

"Meaning what?"

"I wasn't kidding you about that moon," Flagg said. "The Old Pilgrim that Barney uses for a house bourbon is pure shine."

She brushed silklike strands of blonde hair back from her forehead. "I just can't believe it."

"You didn't have any idea that's what was going on?"

"No," she said. "No, I didn't."

Flagg studied her for a long moment. He would have given odds that she was telling the

truth. He decided to take a chance. "Look, Terry," he said quietly, "I'm going to level with you. I'm probably putting my neck in a sling doing it, but I'm at a dead end otherwise."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm a Treasury agent," he said, watching her face for a reaction.

Her eyebrows knitted, but that was all. No, she wasn't in on it, he was certain now. He continued, "With the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax Unit for Northern California. Based in San Francisco. Somebody is manufacturing and distributing large amounts of contraband liquor in these mountains. It's my job to find out who."

She looked at him with a different expression, as if she were very glad he wasn't a night prowler after all. "Why are you telling me all this?" she asked finally. "I told you, I don't know anything about it."

"You might be able to help me."

"How?"

"By answering a few questions."

"Well . . . all right."

"How long have you worked for Barney?"

"About eight months."

"Do you know where he gets his liquor? From which distributor?"

"From Kardin Wholesale, I think. In Eureka."

"Just from there?"

"Yes, that's the only one I know of."

"Who else makes regular deliveries here?"

"Well, there's the snack food company," Terry said. "And the soft drink people. And Tru-Test Petroleum. That's about all."

Flagg said, "Tru-Test Petroleum?"

"Yes."

"What's that?"

"A fuel oil company."

"How often do they deliver?"

"About once a week."

"Drums, or what?"

"No, cases," Terry said reflectively. "You know, it always did strike me as a little odd that Barney would use so many cases of oil every week . . ."

"Where does he store these cases?"

"There's a small boiler room off the storage room."

"Show me, please," Flagg said.

They went into the storage room, with Flagg clicking off the overhead lights as they left the bar. The boiler room door was hidden behind some of the crates; he had missed it in the darkness earlier. It was locked, but he worked on the latch with his penknife and got it open. Inside, he broke open one of two dozen stacked cases marked FUEL OIL—INFLAMMABLE.

The case was filled with bottles of Old Pilgrim.

Flagg looked at Terry. "Where do I find this Tru-Test Petroleum?"

She was a little breathless. "In Emmetville," she said. "That's a small logging town about five miles to the west. Tru-Test is on the outskirts, on Hathaway Road."

"Are the grounds fenced in?"

"Yes. They have guards at the main gate, and I don't think you can get in without some kind of pass."

Flagg nodded. "The Big Tree River runs parallel to Hathaway Road, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does."

Flagg considered. "Who owns Tru-Test?"

"Riley Morgan."

"What does this Morgan look like?"

"He's a big redhaired man with a lot of freckles across the bridge of his nose," she answered. "About forty or forty-five. He comes in here once in a while."

"To have a drink or to see Barney?"

"Both. They usually go into Barney's office."

Flagg said, "Okay," and smiled at her. "I'm going to trust you to keep quiet about all this. Don't make a liar out of my intuition."

"You don't have to worry,"

Terry said. "When it comes to the federal government, I'm everybody's little angel."

"Good," Flagg said. "What's your cabin number? In case I need you again?"

"Fifteen."

Flagg broke open the rifle and emptied it and put the cartridges in his pocket. Then he handed the weapon back to Terry. "I'll be in touch," he said.

When she had gone, he relocked the boiler room door. There was no way he could cover up the broken hasp on the storage room entrance, but when Barney didn't find anything missing in the morning, he would probably put it down to vandals.

Flagg moved off through the darkness toward where he had left his camper.

The sun was a brilliant red disc on the eastern horizon when Flagg appeared at the edge of the Big Tree River early next morning. He wore an old army jacket and rubber wading boots, and carried a tackle box and a glass trout rod. He puffed contentedly on a briar pipe.

He set the tackle box down on the spongy bank, opened it, removed a fly reel, and attached it to the rod. From the half dozen or so steelhead trout flies hooked to his jacket, he selected a Klamath Nymph and busied himself tying it on the nylon line.

When he had finished, he adjusted the old and battered hat he wore, tested his boots in the rushing water for leakage, and then stepped into the narrow stream.

He glanced at the opposite bank from time to time, in a seemingly uninterested way. A dirt trail led up to Hathaway Road there, and less than fifty yards beyond the road was the fenced compound of Tru-Test Petroleum.

It was a large concern. The main entrance was some seventy-five yards to the south on Hathaway Road, and there was a sentry box with a uniformed guard. The gates opened electronically, from controls inside the box. Flagg could not see much of what went on inside the compound.

He spent three hours fishing in the Big Tree River, working his way upstream slowly until he had drawn opposite the main entrance. He caught four trout, and threw them all back. During that time, several dark green delivery trucks with the company name emblazoned on the doors and sides arrived and departed at regular intervals. One large diesel tanker came just before nine, and left forty minutes later. A new limousine driven by a redhaired man entered the Tru-Test grounds at

nine twenty. There was no other traffic.

At eleven o'clock, Flagg packed up his fishing gear and left the stream.

Shortly before three that afternoon—twenty minutes after another of the large diesel tankers had arrived at Tru-Test, and half an hour after the redhaired man had driven out in his new limousine—a white panel truck with the words **RIGHT WAY PLUMBING, INC.** plastic-stenciled on the sides stopped before the locked entrance gates.

The uniformed guard came out of the sentry box and looked inside. "Yes?"

"Here to fix the john in the warehouse," Flagg said. He wore a pair of faded blue overalls and a baseball cap. He was still puffing on his briar pipe.

The guard frowned. "Mr. Morgan didn't mention anything about a plumber coming in."

"Well, he called the shop less than an hour ago."

"What's the matter with the john?"

"He didn't give me any details," Flagg said. "Check with him, if you want."

"He's not here right now."

"When'll he be back?"

"Not until tomorrow."

"Look," Flagg said, "it don't matter to me one way or the other if I do the job. There's an

automatic service charge just for me to come out here."

The guard chewed at his lower lip indecisively. "I don't know," he said. "How long will it take?"

"Now, how would I know that if I ain't seen the problem yet? That Mr. Morgan seemed to think I ought to get out here right away, but if you don't think so, I'll go off back home. Like I said, there's a service charge whether I do the job or not—"

"All right," the guard said. "Do you know where the main water house is?"

Flagg shrugged. "I've never been here before."

"Follow the white lines until you come to a big corrugated iron building with a loading dock along one side. Go on around to Door 5 and ask for Lou. He's in charge there."

"Okay," Flagg said.

The guard opened the gates from inside the sentry box, and Flagg drove the panel onto the Tru-Test grounds. He followed the white lines as directed, and a couple of minutes later he stopped in front of Door 5 in the long, narrow warehouse. He had seen the corrugated iron roof from the river, and accurately guessed the building's purpose. There were three of the dark green delivery trucks pulled up to the loading platform in front of other numbered doors, and a

good deal of activity on the dock itself. Pallets of boxes with markings identical to those he had seen in the rear storage room of Barney's Oasis were being stacked at intervals by two forklifts, and freight handlers were hurrying back and forth with dollies between the pallets and the trucks.

Flagg got out of the panel, opened the rear doors, and took out a large tool kit. Then he went up several wooden steps and through Door 5. A short, fat man with thinning hair was writing on a clipboard. Flagg stepped up to him and asked, "Where do I find Lou?"

"I'm Lou," the man answered, appraising him with cold eyes.

"Here to fix the john," Flagg said.

"The john? What's the matter with it?"

"Who knows? I got this call from Mr. Morgan to come out and fix it, that's all."

Lou continued to study him. Flagg puffed uninterestedly on the briar pipe. Finally Lou said, "Okay, then. Come on, I'll show you where it is."

Flagg followed him along the cement floor of the warehouse, past more full pallets stacked three high. At the rear wall, between the stacks, there was a door marked NO ADMITTANCE. Loud, vibrant sounds of machinery in operation filtered through

the door. On one side was another door marked RESTROOM, and Lou opened that one. They went in.

"Here it is," Lou said. "It looks all right to me."

"You can't tell by looking."

"How long will you be?"

"What am I?" Flagg asked.  
"Psychic?"

"Okay, okay."

Flagg opened the toolbox and pretended to rummage around inside. After a moment, Lou went out and closed the door behind him. Flagg straightened and stood at the door, listening, for a full minute. Then he opened the door and peered out. Lou had disappeared among the stacks of pallets.

Flagg closed the door again and locked it. There was a window in the rear wall, and he went to it and brushed some dust from the glass and looked out. He could see across to where the fuel pumps were located. The diesel tanker that had arrived earlier was parked there, and three men were standing around it. One end of a huge black petroleum hose was hooked to a bottom outlet on the first of the tanker's two reservoirs; the other end disappeared into a large, square metal plate set into the concrete yard.

Underground tanks, Flagg thought, and then: Well, I'll be damned! He had just realized

that with that hose hooked to the bottom outlet on the reservoir, they couldn't possibly be filling it; they were emptying it. Strange. The tanker was one of Tru-Test's, not a delivery vehicle from a manufacturer. Why would they be emptying fuel oil from one of their own trucks back into the underground tanks? Unless . . .

Unless it wasn't fuel oil, at all. Unless it was shine.

Flagg smiled a little and then frowned. Of course, that was it. They were storing the bootleg in the underground tanks. But it made his job that much more difficult. They brought the bootleg in the tankers from the point where it was being made, and he had no idea where that was. He had hoped they had the actual still operation here at Tru-Test. That would have made things one hell of a lot simpler.

He listened to the machinery sounds coming through the wall and thought about the door marked NO ADMITTANCE. With the moon being stored here, and distributed from here, they were obviously bottling it here, too. He knew what he would find on the other side of that door: a long three-sided roller belt, with stainless steel machinery along it which would fill, cap, label, and stamp the bottles of "Old Pilgrim," with a direct pipeline to the storage tanks outside. But

he didn't need to get a look inside there, now.

Patiently, Flagg allowed fifteen minutes to pass by his wristwatch and then he closed up the toolbox and unlocked the door and stepped into the warehouse. He found his way to Door 5. Lou was writing on the clipboard again. "All fixed?" he asked as Flagg approached.

"Yeah."

"What was the trouble?"

Flagg made up something.

Lou laughed. "I'm glad I don't have your job."

"Sometimes I wish I didn't either," Flagg said sourly. "Well, hang in there."

"You too."

He went down the steps and put the tool kit in the rear of the panel. He drove back to the front gate, and the same guard came out of the sentry box. "That was quick."

"Sure," Flagg answered. "That's our motto."

The guard opened the gates and Flagg drove out and turned south on Hathaway Road. He parked the rented panel in the parking lot behind a supermarket in Emmettville a quarter mile away. In the rear, he changed out of the coveralls and the baseball cap, back into his fishing clothes. Then he retrieved the camper and drove back to a spot on Hathaway Road where he could watch the

main gates of Tru-Test through a pair of binoculars.

Half an hour later, he saw the diesel tanker come out through the gates. It turned south and passed him. Flagg waited until it got a good distance down the road, then started the camper and swung out after it.

The tanker turned west onto a county highway just before Emmetville. The highway looped around to the north, bypassing the town, and then swung east, climbing into the mountains. Flagg followed at a discreet distance. They had gone some fifteen miles when the tanker turned off onto another county road, this one in relatively poor repair. A mile into there, it turned again, this time onto a packed earth road flanked with signs reading PRIVATE PROPERTY—TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Flagg passed by, looking up the private road. A couple of hundred yards along he could see two men with rifles. A third man was swinging a heavy wooden gate open to allow the tanker admittance.

Flagg followed the county road for another mile, turned around, and came back again. The tanker had disappeared, and the gate was closed. The men were still there.

He drove directly to Barney's Oasis.

\* \* \*

Cabin 15 had green shutters and an old, rusty-framed swing in one corner of its narrow porch. Flagg knocked on the door. After a moment it opened and Terry Kenyon looked out. She was wearing the short miniskirt and tight white blouse that composed her waitress uniform.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

She nodded, standing aside, and he went in. The interior was furnished spartanly, but it was clean and had a comfortable feminine touch. Flagg barely glanced at it. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Listen, how well do you know this area?"

She didn't draw back from his touch. "I grew up in Emmetville," she answered. "What is it, Flagg? Did you find out something?"

"Maybe," he said, and told her where he had followed the tanker. "Do you know where that private road leads?"

"To an old abandoned mine. There are a lot of them around here, from the old gold rush days, I suppose."

"Anything else in the area?"

"Just woodland."

"What about this mine?"

"Well, for a while it was turned into a gravel pit. Some special kind used in making concrete. But even that was abandoned, about ten years ago. I remember that a lot of gravel was taken

out of the base of the hill, so that the pit almost reached the main mine shaft."

"It's still abandoned, as far as you know?"

"I heard that somebody had bought the property and was going to reactivate the pit," Terry said. "But if they've begun yet, I wouldn't know about it."

"Okay," Flagg said. "Now, is there any way in there besides that private road?"

"The road itself only goes as far as the gravel pit. There's a spur track which comes in from the other side and reaches all the way up to the mine tower. I think it goes inside the hill through an auxiliary tunnel there."

"Foot trails?"

"None that you could follow for very long." She paused. "Do you think that's where the moonshine is being made?"

Flagg shrugged. "I'm not sure," he said. "How do I find that spur you mentioned?"

"Follow the county road past the private entrance. About five miles farther along, the main railroad track crosses it. Walk back on the tracks to the second switch. Not the first, but the second."

"Right."

"You're not going up there alone, are you?" Terry asked. There was concern in her voice.

Flagg grinned. "Don't worry

about me," he said. He moved to the door. "Thanks."

"Will I see you again, Flagg?"

"Maybe," he said. "Take care of yourself." He slipped out and closed the door quietly behind him.

Flagg found the spur without difficulty.

The sun was setting, and there was less than an hour of daylight left. He moved quickly along the side of the track, keeping to the brush as much as possible, stopping occasionally to listen. He wore khakis now, which blended with the surrounding terrain better than black or dark beige clothing, and a new navy blue seaman's knit cap pulled down to conceal his prematurely salt and pepper hair. He had a long-bladed hunting knife sheathed at his waist.

He thought about the shine operation as he went. Two weeks ago, after three days of abortive low flying over every inch of the county in a chartered plane, he had been forced to admit that the still was extremely well hidden. During his prolonged study of the wild, mountainous terrain, he had uncovered no signs of activity in isolated places, no telltale columns of smoke to point to the possible location of the cooker, no signs of pollution

in the streams he subsequently checked. Nothing at all.

He had begun the tavern-by-tavern search then, drinking Old Pilgrim in each one, asking carefully veiled questions in the hopes of uncovering information about discounts and deals. Until he came to Barney's Oasis, he had drawn a total blank. It was obvious that Riley Morgan was distributing most of the moon out of the county, and perhaps out of the state.

But Morgan had been selling shine to Barney, and that was his big mistake. It had given Flagg the lead he needed. He now knew almost everything he needed to know: that the fuel oil company stored and bottled and distributed the bootleg, and that it was being manufactured in the old abandoned mine. At least, he was almost positive that was where the still was located; logic told him that the tankers would drive through the gravel pit and inside the main shaft of the mine to load from the vats. Too, Terry had said the spur tracks led inside an auxiliary tunnel; that would undoubtedly connect with the main shaft, as would other passages. These would serve as the still's ventilation system, explaining why he had seen nothing from the air. Nevertheless, he had to make absolutely certain; that was his job.

He rounded a slight curve in the tracks, moving silently and staying in the protective cover of a high growth of juniper. Suddenly, through the thicket, he saw a man dressed in a pair of Levi's and an old plaid work shirt. The man was sitting on a high, flat-topped rock next to the tracks, his back to Flagg, throwing pebbles at a rotted log on the other side. A rifle rested beside him, propped against the rock.

Flagg backed off a few steps and made a wide circle around the guard, climbing over rocky ground. He could see the mine tower now, a crumbling wooden structure outlined against the sunset sky in gloomy emphasis.

Several minutes later, he stood hidden behind a large boulder at the entrance to the auxiliary tunnel. The timbers of the tower were ridden with termites and worms and dry rot, and the structure looked near collapse. The iron elevator wheel tilted where a support had fallen away. Debris cluttered the weed-choked ground. Off on one side was a crude stone fireplace and chimney, all that remained of a mine office.

Flagg left his concealment and approached the black mouth of the tunnel cautiously. When he was certain there was no one about, he swept aside vinelike weeds and slipped inside. The

blackness was absolute, and he groped his way along one of the cold, damp walls until he had penetrated some fifty feet. Then he took the pen-glass from his pocket, shielded it in his handkerchief, and switched it on.

In its faint light, he could see that the tunnel was nearly a cave-in, with mounds of earth and shale and fallen timbers choking the passage. He moved forward carefully.

Five minutes passed. A collapsed section of the tunnel forced Flagg to crawl part of the way on his hands and knees. But as soon as he was able to stand again, he reached a dead end; the tunnel was completely blocked. At first, he thought it was another, final cave-in, but then he realized that the obstruction had been manmade. This must be where the tunnel connected with the main shaft.

He worked the dim flash along the wall of dirt and rock. Near the top, he found a small opening which appeared to pass through to the other side. He dug carefully at the opening, enlarging it, working as silently as possible. Finally, he was able to see through clearly. He stared down a long incline at a widened grotto in the main shaft of the old mine.

The still was there.

The boiler and distillation column jutted upward, disappear-

ing into the rock, probably to another tunnel. Steam rose lightly in the murky, floodlit cavern. He could see five large vats clustered at one end, with piping to carry the mash to the column. Even as near as he was, he could not smell much of the fermentation process; the vats were well covered. An underground stream no doubt supplied the water and carried off the waste, which would be well filtered by the time it reached the ground level. There were half a dozen men around a control panel full of gauges and valves, and another group near one of the vats. Flagg, watching, gave grudging admiration to the builder. This still was a thoroughly professional job.

He continued to peer down into the grotto for another full minute. Then he headed back. He had seen enough. Now that he knew the exact location of the still, his job was almost finished.

He made his way to the tunnel opening, made sure the area was still free of guards, and then moved out. It was dusk now, and the long shadows of gathering darkness afforded him a good deal of protective cover. He followed the spur tracks to the main rail line, and then to where he had left his camper, without incident.

He drove back to Barney's

Oasis and went into the public telephone booth at one end of the parking lot. He dialed a number from memory. On the fourth ring, a man's voice answered. "Alcohol and Tobacco Unit, Northern California. Adamson."

Flagg gave it to him fast, talking through interruptions until Adamson was listening intently. He outlined the entire shine operation, and then went back and detailed it, missing nothing. When he had finished, he asked, "Have you got it all? Clear?"

"I've got it," Adamson said. "But listen, who is this? Who's calling?"

Flagg smiled. "You don't know me," he said. "I'm just a concerned citizen. A teetotaler."

He rang off and stepped out

of the booth. Churlak would be pleased, he thought. Churlak was a progressive, a member of the new breed, a big business executive. These damned independents deserve to get busted, he had told Flagg. They never learn. There's just no way they can buck the Organization and make out, no way at all. But why waste time and manpower and invite undue publicity by putting them out of business ourselves? Why not let the feds do it—legally?

And so Flagg, the troubleshooter, had gone to work.

He put another dime in the slot and dialed Churlak's private number in San Francisco. While it was ringing, he thought about Terry Kenyon. He hoped he wouldn't have to report to Churlak in person until sometime tomorrow.

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# The Killing Philosopher

by Jack Ritchie

**H**e stood waiting in the doorway of the cabin and he seemed even to welcome us.

His eyes went over both Harry and me and he smiled. "Neat dark suits, conservative ties, black shoes. I expected as much."

"Would your name be James C. Wheeler?" I asked.

He nodded and still smiled.

Harry held up the wallet. "Did you lose this?"

"No," Wheeler said. "I did not lose the wallet. I intentionally left it beside the body."

Harry and I looked at each other.

"But come in," Wheeler invited.

We followed him inside. The cabin was clean and equipped only with basic furniture.

Wheeler reached for the coffee pot and removed the lid. "When did you find the body?"

"About noon," I said.

He spooned fresh coffee into the basket. "By the way, just out of curiosity, what was her name?"

"Carol Wisniewski," Harry said.

Wheeler shrugged. "Even the name means nothing at all to me."

I picked up the rifle lying on the cot and pulled back the bolt. A spent cartridge popped out onto the floor. "So you wanted to be caught?"

"Of course," Wheeler said. He put the pot on the small stove and turned on the bottled gas. "I am now forty years old, and I have lived, by choice, in this cabin for almost my entire adult life." He blew out the match. "Do you think it has been a dull life?"

Harry shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Maybe you hunt and fish."

Wheeler shook his head. "No. I do not hunt, and I do not fish. I indulge in the greatest adventure of all, I think."

He reached for his pipe and pouch. "I was just past twenty-one when my father died. He left me a small inheritance. Anyone else might have run through the money within a year or so, but I chose to come here. It has always been my natural predisposition to avoid the world. By living simply, I made the money last for almost twenty years. But now there is nothing left —nothing at all."

"What has that got to do with killing the girl?" I asked.

"Patience," Wheeler said. "And so I was faced with the prospect of having to go to work in order to live." He smiled broadly. "Oh, it is not work itself that appalls me. It is the expenditure of time that the operation involves; time stolen from me and my thoughts. And one has only one lifetime, you know."

"Sure," Harry said. "She was fourteen years old."

Wheeler shrugged. "So finally I came up with the solution to my problem, the only solution. I would go to prison. There I would be fed and clothed, but above all, I would be given the freedom of time for speculative thought."

Harry had been examining the rifle. "You think they won't make you work in jail?"

Wheeler smiled. "I have taken the time to investigate thoroughly your enlightened prison system. I will simply refuse to work. I know that no force or intimidation will be used against me. I will be placed in solitary."

"And you figure that a philosopher can do his thinking on bread and water?" I asked.

Wheeler lit his pipe. "As I said, I took the trouble to investigate. Solitary in this state means just that and nothing more. The meals served are identical to those given the other prisoners, and one is even allowed reading material." He

smiled contentedly. "I think that I shall be supremely happy."

Harry put down the rifle. "You wanted to go to prison, so you shot somebody to get there? Just like that?"

He frowned. "No. Not just like that. I planned and researched before I acted, and then this morning I went down the path that winds to the lake and waited. I shot the first person to come by. It happened to be this Carol Wisniewski. But it could have been anyone."

There was silence and his eyes went over us. "Do you think I am insane?"

"I don't know," I said.

He glared. "No, I am not insane. On the contrary, I have reached the ultimate in sanity, and that is to realize that nothing is really important except one's own wishes, one's own desires, one's own life."

"So the life of Carol Wisniewski meant absolutely nothing to you?" I asked.

"Nothing," Wheeler said. "Nothing at all." He laughed sharply. "I see that you have no use for me. Perhaps you are thinking that, if nothing else, it could be arranged that I 'accidentally' fall down a number of times before I reach the police station environment?"

Harry and I said nothing.

Wheeler pulled a folded piece of paper from a book on the ta-

ble. "This is a copy of an affidavit from my doctor. It certifies that I am in the best of health and, specifically, that I do not suffer from any bruises, contusions, or broken bones. Would you care to examine it?"

Neither Harry nor I touched the paper.

His eyes went over the objects in the room. "There is really nothing material here that I will miss. In fact, I am rather looking forward to the new leisure required for pure thought.

You might say that I am actually engaged in distilling human existence to the length of one book; perhaps even one essay; one sentence."

"Or one scream?" I asked.

He seemed irritated. "We will not wait for the coffee. You may take me to your police station now."

My cousin, Harry Wissniewski, pulled the knife out of his pocket.

And I smiled. "Who the hell said we were cops?"

# A Little Bit of a Jigsaw Puzzle

by Pauline C. Smith

Mama never liked me very much. Mostly, I suppose, because with my birth she became a mother, and she certainly didn't care much about being a mother. Anyway, she never tried it again. Then, when I had the nerve to grow up and have a couple of kids of my own, making her a *grandmother*, she liked me even less.

Mama, you see, always thought of herself as a winsomely young and frolicsome lass, which Papa, who was almost twenty years older, enthusiastically fostered by calling her "Little Bit" and never allowing a whit of sadness or responsibility to come her way until he died this spring, and he certainly couldn't help that.

"Oh, hell," moaned Jeff when we got the news. "She'll probably have to come here and live with us."

I was too busy packing a bag and telling the kids, Steve, fourteen, and Carolyn, twelve, to take care of their father and Jeff to take care of the kids to think about the dire probability until I was out on the freeway. Then I thought about it during every

one of those three hundred and fifty miles, all through the funeral, and afterward.

When I suggested the new living arrangement to Mama, she stood there, her pointy toes and very high heels solidly dug into her Persian rug in her plush living room, surrounded by her majolica and porcelains, and said in her little-girl treble that she would do very well right where she was, and I realized that now I'd have to worry about her long distance instead of close up.

"But, Mama, not all alone," I cried.

She could get along great, Mama said, standing there in all her five foot, ninety-eight pounds of bleached blonde black-veiled glory, ticking off on her gloved fingers her pillars of strength: Mr. Merrick to send her monthly check, Joe Gomez to mow her lawn, and Mrs. Herter to flick a dustcloth over the house twice a week. She didn't even want any help in selling the car, a venerable Cadillac she couldn't drive; as a matter of fact, she didn't think she'd sell it at all.

"Why not?" I screamed faintly, and she informed me, with great

dignity, that she just might learn to drive it, so I screamed again.

"Now why don't you run along, Margaret," she directed me. "Run along to your husband and children . . ." This right after the funeral! I had spent only two nights and a day and a half at the side of my bereaved mother in mourning for my deceased father! What could I do? I ran along.

Before I ran very far, though, I stopped at the office of Mr. Merrick, who said with a banker's smile that Mama was in fine shape financially, which was all that mattered to him. It was the same with Mrs. Herter, who considered any widow with a roof over her head a lucky widow indeed, and Joe Gomez promised to mow and fertilize weekly.

Even Jeff, when I arrived home shattered, wondered what all the flak was about. "Sounds to me as if the old girl is taking it very well," he said in his ad man's hearty *we'll run her up the flagpole and see if she flies* voice.

So I, feeling this genetic responsibility for a wisp of sixty-one-year-old girlhood who still wore pointy stilt-heeled pumps and pointy padded bras, was the only one concerned. "She's always had someone to take care of her," I worried.

"It's time, then, she took care of herself," said Jeff.

"But she doesn't know how," I agonized.

Jeff laughed as he said, "She knows how to get what she wants."

It turned out, I guess, that we were both right.

Since Mama was the I-won't-call-you, you-call-me type, I called every week, and our shortwinded telephone conversations went about like this:

Me: "How are you, Mama?"

Mama: "Just fine, dear," in her tinkling voice.

Me: "Is Mrs. Herter doing her job?"

Mama: "Yes, dear."

Me: "Is Joe Gomez mowing the lawn?"

Mama: "Yes, dear," succinct and uninformative until a couple of months after Papa's death when she let drop a surprising bit of news: "I am learning to drive the car."

"Mama!" I screamed. "Who is teaching you?"

"Why, a young man from the driving school," she said.

I told Jeff, "She's too old to learn to drive," and he said he'd heard of women older than she who learned to drive, and I said I thought I ought to go down there and see what was going on, and he told me not to be a fool, that Mama was doing her thing and she not only wouldn't

like interference, she wouldn't stand for it.

I figured he was right, knowing Mama, and knowing how she didn't like me much anyway.

Our telephone exchanges became a bit more lively with the driving lessons, which she took daily. "How are you getting along?" I asked. "Oh, fine," she said, and after a couple of months of this, I asked her if she wasn't about ready to take her driver's test.

Mama (airily): "There's plenty of time for that. As long as I have someone to drive me around . . ."

"What did I tell you?" said Jeff triumphantly. "Your mother knows how to get what she wants, so she signed up for driving lessons and got herself a daily chauffeur."

Actually, I was somewhat relieved that Mama was putting off the day she would drive alone, and my conversational questions regressed to: "Is Mrs. Herter doing her job?" and "Is Joe Gomez mowing the lawn?" both of which received the submissive if laconic replies of "Yes" for another month or so when Mama unaccountably answered, "I let them go, dear, the two of them."

"Mama," I screamed, "why?"

"Because I wanted to, Margaret," she said.

When Mama changed her impersonal "dear" to the highly personal use of my given name, it meant she wanted me to shut my mouth because what I was using it for was none of my business. "Don't you have anybody to clean the house and mow the lawn?" I screamed, and she said, with great dignity, "Yes, Margaret, I have." Period.

"Maybe I'd better go on down there," I told Jeff.

"What for?" he asked.

"Oh, to look over the cleaning woman and see who she's got for a yard man."

"For Pete's sake," he said, "let her live her own life."

I mentioned casually to Mama, the next time I called, "I thought I might come down to see you," and she said, "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said, "just for a little visit."

"I might be gone," she said.

"Gone? Where?" I screamed.

Then she came back with a couple of non sequiturs and three or four feminine obliquities that indicated, mostly, an antipathy for guests and questions—me in particular, and mine.

"If you go anywhere," I said, "on a trip or something, you'll let me know, won't you?"

"Of course, dear," she answered.

I didn't believe her. "She doesn't want me," I told Jeff.

"Has she ever?"

"She said something about traveling."

"She's got a right," and the following week when I phoned and Mama did not answer, Jeff said, "Well, okay, maybe she's off on one of those trips she was talking about."

"She promised to tell me about it first."

"You didn't believe her, did you?"

"No," I said. I also didn't believe she'd take off on a trip without Papa to hold her hand and make all the arrangements and call her "Little Bit." Not Mama without Papa.

"Why not?" said Jeff. "She fired the housekeeper and gardener without your father. She took driving lessons and grabbed herself a chauffeur without him . . ."

I felt a chill step down my spine.

I called again late that night and in the morning, and then I packed and was on my way.

"Aren't you kind of jumping the gun?" asked Jeff. "Look, if you're worried, phone one of the neighbors . . ." (One of the neighbors, hah!)

Mama's house, pseudo-Spanish, built during that fancy time when they put a fat little towerlike appendage on one corner that always reminded me of an obscene tumor, perches on a hillside between tall, vine-cov-

ered walls. The lot extends from one street to the other, with neighbors on each side and above, but Mama never knew a single one of them, and that was one thing that worried me. She could fall flat on her stilt heels and die among her souvenirs without a soul to know.

It was windy dusk when I arrived at the house. The town below looked like a bowl of diamonds; the houses on the hill were cheerfully lighted. I parked in the driveway on the street above, nosed close to the garage door, which I tried to open and found locked.

I could see no light from the back of the house as I walked down the cement steps to the yard. I thought of Longfellow's lines: "The twilight is sad and cloudy,/The wind blows wild and free . . ."

I tried the back door, then banged on it, calling, "Mama. It's me, Margaret." I went around the house, peering in windows between the draperies, through outside dusk into inside gloom. *Dark as a tomb in there*, I thought, shuddering, wishing I had not thought in cliche. I ran then, stumbling on the uneven flagstone path, thinking of Mama in her ridiculous tall heels, and tore up the front steps. No light.

I banged the knocker, lifted the doormat, felt along the top

of the ornate door—but Mama, of course, was not the type to hide extra keys under mats or above doors as she was not the type to offer an extra key to her very own daughter in case of emergency. I became suddenly furiously angry with Mama, with her immaturity, her secracies and silly little vanities, as I stood helpless before her closed door while she might be dying inside—or dead.

Then I remembered a trick I had read about and rummaged in my bag for a plastic credit card, ran it down the crack of the door, heard a click, turned the knob, opened the door, and called out, "Mama."

I felt along the wall, found the switch, and turned on the lights. The hall looked different. "Mama," I called. I left the front door open behind me and walked hesitantly to the dark living room, flicked the switch, bringing several lamps alight. "Mama," I called again loudly. "Are you in here?"

Nothing.

The living room looked different, too.

Of course, the whole house seemed to be different without Mama fluttering among her treasures, and tapping those silly heels on hardwood between Persian rugs. I stood there yelling, "Mama" like an idiot, my hand still on the wall switch, when I

thought, well now, this is not finding Mama, and I walked determinedly to the sitting room, switching on lights; to the dining room, flashing on the chandelier; then to the kitchen, turning on the overhead lights—two bedrooms, two baths, the desk lamp in the study.

The house was ablaze and empty except for me, quiet except for the sound of the wind outside, and that damn line came back to haunt me: "The wind blows wild—" when the front door slammed, sending me at a dead run through all the alien rooms to wrench it open again.

It must have been the wind. It really must have been the wind. I looked for the bust, a bronze that had always stood in the hallway, to prop the door open—but the bust was not there, nor the pedestal on which it had always stood. *That* was what was different about the hall as I remembered it.

I tore out then, slammed the door behind me, raced down the stairs and along the flagstone path around the house, up the steps and into my car. Dark now; I could see the shafts of light I had left shining from Mama's windows down below. The houses across the street above looked warmly bright. The trees whipped in the wind, and diamonds flickered in the town bowl.

I drove down the hill, found a motel, registered and phoned home. Of course there was no answer. I glanced at my watch: seven thirty. Jeff and the kids would be out somewhere to dinner—catch any of them turning a hand to the frying pan or kettle. So I sat down and cried. Then I went out, got into my car, and drove to the police station.

They looked at me, the officer behind the desk and the one leaning on it, as if I were a hysterical female (which I never am, although I was sobbing rather wildly and speaking in an uneven voice), and orated from the heights of their Male and Official Authority, explaining, as if to a child, that I had broken and entered (no matter that I was a daughter), that my mother was an adult (which I questioned), and if she chose to be absent it was strictly her business, certainly not theirs.

I sneered through my tears and raced out, burning rubber as I left to return to the motel. Those officers must have shaken their heads as they debated whether or not to tag me on a speeding charge.

Then I called home again. Thankfully, the family now had its stomach full and Jeff was available for talking—listening, rather, which he does poorly, being an ad man who always has to have the triple word. "She

isn't home?" he said. "Well, like I told you, she probably took off on one of those trips she's been talking about . . . You didn't look under the beds? Oh, for Pete's sake . . . No, I will not drive down there to help you look under the beds. I've got a meeting tomorrow . . . Of course the police can't do anything. If you suspect foul play, get some evidence and then they can help you. But my advice is, go turn off those damned lights and come on home and wait for word from your mother . . ." So I sneered over the phone and hung up.

After a restless night on a motel mattress made for people who need to sleep on boards, I had a sketchy breakfast and drove on up to Mama's. I peered through the windows as I walked around the house, and by cupping my hands, I could see the glow of electric bulbs through the faint light of day in shadowed rooms.

The street was quiet except for a boy cycling toward the high school two blocks away. I waited until he passed before I got out my credit card.

I switched off the hall light and left the door open. The Santa Anas had blown themselves out, so it *should* stay that way. I investigated the rooms, turning off lights, opening draperies wide, looking under beds, into closets and cabinets, searching

everywhere except the basement, and I suddenly thought of that.

It was a half-basement, built under the part of the house on the slope, with nothing down there but a furnace, some stored boxes, a couple of trunks, and several pieces of luggage. The basement stairs led down from the kitchen, the door secured by a slide bolt. I switched on the light at the top of the stairs and leaned over the wooden banister. The low-wattage naked bulb lit the basement dimly, leaving the corners in shadow. I put one foot on the second step, then backed up hurriedly, slammed the door shut and shot the bolt. There was no body down there, no shadow large enough in that small space to hide a body unless, of course, one were to consider the dark pocket under the stairway—but I would not consider it, not for a minute!

I went back to the front hall to make sure the door was still open with the sun streaming in. It was then that I saw the shadow of the pedestal, a very faint shadow against the delicate scenic wallpaper—a blurred outline seen from only a certain position to mark where the marble pedestal and bronze bust had stood for so many years. I turned icy in the warm sun of the hall and wrapped my arms around myself. This house had always

seemed cold even in the smothering atmosphere of too many things—too, too many things—and now I knew what was wrong, what was different. Some of those things were missing.

I went through the house again, this time trying to remember what my eyes had been accustomed to all my life, to particularize objects that should be there and now were not: a vase, an urn, a figurine, of Wedgwood, cloisonné, Dresden; jewel boxes, cut crystal . . . I don't know that Mama truly loved them, but they were her backdrop, a part of her image, tinkling-voiced conversational pieces, prized for their rarity, for they were her vanity.

She would not, willingly, be separated from them.

I ran, then, for the front hall and the telephone. I yanked open the drawer of the stand. The telephone directory lay there, open to the yellow pages, headed on the left AMBULANCE-ANSWERING, on the right ANSWERING-ANTIQUES. I held the place with the flat of my hand while I searched for Mr. Merrick's office number.

I dialed and asked him questions. Did Mama need money? Had she asked him for extra funds?

The questions caused him to rise defensively belligerent in justification of his position as

trustee and executor, explaining the duties of his office in wordy righteous condescension. Mama, according to the terms of the will and the trust account, had been allotted a generous monthly income. Should she desire additional funds, she needed only to apprise Mr. Merrick of her wants and the amount, a stipulation set down for the purpose of protection—*her* protection. Mr. Merrick's already high voice rose with the outrage of a man whose veracity and honor have been viciously attacked.

I finally said, "Oh, hell," and hung up.

Then I returned the directory to its original position, open at the yellow pages, and ran my finger down the three antique dealers listed under ANTIQUES. The sun had reached its eleven o'clock position, so that it shone through the open front door directly onto a thumbnail crease under the Main Street address of Truesdell's Treasure Trove. I closed the directory, shut the front door, and climbed the steps to my car up above.

The Treasure Trove turned out to be an elegantly unobtrusive slot between a cutesy gift shop and a brazen furniture store. I found a parking place, walked inside, and was stopped dead by the bronze bust atop the marble pedestal so familiar to me in these very unfamiliar sur-

roundings. The proprietor (probably Mr. Truesdell) advanced upon me, rubbing his hands together, murmuring greetings. I waved him off as I wandered through his trove of treasures, noting here and there remembered objects. Then I turned and asked how he had acquired my mother's belongings.

After a first shocked silence, followed by guarded argument, Mr. Truesdell blinked his eyes and swallowed his alarm as he told me about the man of just two days ago who brought to his shop a car full of art objects. "Young, not yet thirty, about five feet ten, slim. Can't remember whether he was cleanshaven or not. Curly brown hair, sideburns. Well-dressed. Name? Oh, no, I didn't get his name. It was a cash transaction." He looked at me with despair as he added, "His knowledge of antiques seemed to be fairly extensive, so why would I think he didn't belong to those treasures he brought, especially since he brought them in that big old Cadillac?"

Why indeed, I thought, remembering Mama's ever-constant tinkling-voiced descriptions over the objects that formed her backdrop and made her image—remembering too, with startling abruptness, the big old Cadillac she had set out to learn to drive . . .

I was out of the shop and into my own car, edging my way from the parking spot, knowing I should seek a telephone directory to look up the driving schools in town, when I saw the sign, ADULT DRIVER EDUCATION, and swung into the parking lot.

It was noon, and the girl in the office was eating her lunch from a brown paper bag. She stuffed the bag into a bottom drawer and rose when I asked my questions about Mama.

"What was that name again?" she asked. "Mrs. Mossby? Mrs. Veronica Mossby?" and drew out an account book from under the counter. "Yes," she said, "she did take our driving course," and looked up. "But she didn't finish. Many of them don't. You see, most of the students we get are older women just learning to drive, like widows and stuff who've always had someone to get them around and now they don't."

I nodded.

"Well, they cop out. They decide they'll use their legs after all—take taxis . . ."

"Or get someone else to do their driving for them," I said.

"Right."

"Who taught her?" I asked.

The girl's finger traveled. "That was the new man. His name was Ralph . . ."

My heart began to beat hard and fast against my chest.

"Ralph Overholst. He walked in here with some good references from up north at a time Mr. Barnard needed another instructor, so he put him on. He wasn't here long, couple of months, then he just didn't show one day . . ."

"And that was?"

"About a month ago. No, month and a half. Same time Mrs. Mossby phoned and said she'd decided not to take more lessons . . ." She looked up, startled. "Hey, is that why . . ."

"What did he look like?" I asked. "This Ralph Overholst?"

"Oh, let's see. Medium tall, medium thin, about thirty, maybe older or younger. Brown hair . . . Why are you asking? Has he done something?" She leaned on the counter, woman-to-woman.

"I don't know," I said.

"They try to be careful here when they hire instructors, check references and stuff, you know?"

I nodded. They probably were careful. However, Mama was not. "Was he cleanshaven?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. They have to be. Mr. Barnard insists on it. Older women don't trust men with beards, that's what he says, and our clientele is mostly older women."

"You told me."

"So Mr. Barnard said he'd

have to shave before he came to work."

My hardbeating heart jounced in my chest. "So this Ralph Overholst had a beard when he applied?"

"Hairy! You wouldn't believe."

"Thank you," I said, and ran out to my car.

I stopped at a drugstore and got a small bottle of brandy, then at a lunch counter I picked up a carton of takeout coffee. I drove back to the motel, laced the coffee with brandy, and dialed Jeff's office. It was twelve thirty. He wouldn't go out to lunch for another half hour or so, and I planned to give him something to chew on. "Jeff?" I yelled into the mouthpiece . . . "No, I am not home. I'm still here . . . Yes, I turned off the lights. And looked under the beds . . . Oh, shut up a minute and *listen* . . ." Then I laid it all out for him—Mama's things in the antique shop, the young man in Mama's Cadillac, Ralph Overholst of the Adult Driving place who quit when Mama did, and what did he think of that?

What he thought of it was the weirdly contrived logic of an ad man. "For Pete's sake, Margaret," he said impatiently, "your mother probably asked this young man to sell a few useless things for her, then she probably hired him to drive her some-

place—on one of those trips she's been talking about . . . Why don't you stop fooling around and come on home?"

I hung up, poured some more brandy in the coffee, and drank it down. I thought, for one cynical moment, of the police, discarding the thought immediately with the certain knowledge that they would regard my suspicions with the same cavalier dispassion as had Jeff.

I jumped into my car and drove to Mrs. Herter's daughter's house.

Mrs. Herter was there, shoes off, varicose veins swollen, serving her grandchildren a peanut butter lunch and hating me for being my mother's daughter.

"Why did she let you go, Mrs. Herter?"

"Because she had that young dude there and you can't tell me any different."

"Young dude?" I asked.

"The way she simpered around him was enough to make anyone sick and him young enough to be her son, maybe young enough to be her grandson . . ."

"About how old?"

"At first, she made a pretense. Well, at first, I guess, he actually was teaching her to drive. He'd come after her on the days I worked there and she'd go tripin' out on those heels of hers to the car he brought in front—you

know, the one with two driver's things . . . ”

“Dual drive.”

“But later, he was teaching her in her own car—and I'll bet that wasn't all he was teaching her, either. I found some of his clothes in that other bedroom . . . ”

I turned my face away.

“The day she told me she didn't need me any more, I figured she didn't want me nosing around. She was probably ashamed. If she wasn't, she should have been.”

“And that's all she said? That she just didn't need you any more?”

“She said she could get along without me. Who knows? Maybe he was going to do the house-work. He was already starting to do the yard work.”

“What did he look like?”

“Just young. All young people look alike.”

It was one o'clock. I knew a lot now that I had not known this morning, but not enough to know where Mama was and why. Enough only to know that her driving instructor, Ralph Overholst (or one who called himself by the name), a hairy, then cleanshaven man, finally neither, but looking like everybody else, had sold a number of Mama's antiques.

I drove from Mrs. Herter's daughter's house across town

and down a street of tiny look-alike houses to the one on the corner where Joe Gomez lived. His truck was not parked in the driveway, so I drove on. He was probably out clipping grass, and any question and answer game I might attempt to play with Mrs. Gomez would come out pure Spanish, which I cannot understand.

I turned toward the hills.

Mama's street and the one above were as quietly austere, as uncommunicatively introverted, as always. I nosed the car onto the slanted driveway but short of the garage door. Then I opened the trunk of the car and rummaged around and found what I think is called a tire iron. The garage door was locked with a padlock. I pushed the end of the tire iron in behind the padlocked bolt and pulled. I heard the groan of old, termite-eaten wood as the bolt broke through. I pulled open the door onto an empty garage. Neat and empty. Tools hung on pegboards, waxes, polishes neatly capped and lined up on the workbench, chamois in a basket.

I put the tire iron back into my trunk and slammed it shut. I walked down the cement steps into the yard below and noticed now that it looked better than it ever had during all those years Joe Gomez had taken care of it—more formally pruned,

clipped, and manicured, the flagstones swept and edged—as if whoever was doing it was either taking pride or making mileage.

Just as I reached the front of the house, the mail truck was moving away from the box down at the curbing. I had forgotten about the mail! I ran down the front steps, opened the box, and drew out a couple of bills—one, the electric bill, postmarked the day before, probably today's delivery—the other, a gas bill postmarked the day before that, yesterday's delivery. The pre-canceled Occupant mail carried no date, but an envelope addressed to Mama from a local travel agency showed a postmark of three days ago. I tore it open upon brochures for "Romantic Hawaii," climbed the front steps, inserted my credit card, and let myself in the house.

I left the door open, put the mail on the telephone stand, opened the drawer, looked up the number of the travel agency, and dialed.

"Why, yes," the sweet young voice answered my question, "that was in reply to a telephone request from Mrs. Mossby. The request?" She seemed to be consulting some notes. "Why, it was the twenty-fifth, three days ago, the same day I sent out the brochures. She said she and her fiancé—I believe that's who she

said—would want to look them over before making a decision."

"Thank you," I said.

"Well, would Mrs. Mossby . . ." she began, and I said, "I'm afraid not." My throat closing, I hung up.

Mama had sat here three days ago, girlishly giddy, apparently alive and well, and made her telephone call—her fateful call, of that I was sure. It was all beginning to come together. I thought of those personal jigsaw puzzles so popular about ten years ago—Jeff had the account of a game company that manufactured them, and he was enthusiastic, so the company enlarged photographs and mounted them of each of the kids and cut them into jigsaw puzzles, big pieces for small fingers to put together, and Jeff brought them home, watching the kids with an ad man's perceptive frown, and got the surprise of his life. Steve, four, slapped his together in nothing flat and screamed in terror at all the cracks in his face. Carolyn, two, managed to get her hair and part of her face locked in, then abandoned the project, which was exactly the position I was in at that moment. There was a big hole in Mama's personal jigsaw puzzle and I didn't want to find those remaining pieces.

\* \* \*

A sudden gust of hot wind swung the door to shadow the hall. The Santa Anas were back. I opened the door wide again, took the telephone book and wedged it, open to the yellow ANTIQUES section, under the door. I stood there a moment, looking out and across the street at one of the few orange groves left in town. There was no one over there to see anything over here. Nor was there anyone on either side to see anything between the tall, vine-covered walls. I felt a little sick.

It was almost two o'clock. *Food*, I thought. I needed food; the brandy sloshing around in my stomach was making tidal waves.

I went into the kitchen. The sun, slanting between fluffy curtains, was September hot, Santa Ana dry, the kitchen shone. *Then* I noticed its shine—not ordinary kitchen sunshine, but scrubbed bright, fussy neat, nothing left on the counter tops, nothing in the polished sink. Mama, now, Mama tended to be careless, as would be expected from a "Little Bit."

I opened the refrigerator and was surprised at the milk and cream, butter, eggs, cheese on the shelves—a well-stocked refrigerator as Mama's had never been. I poured some milk into a glass and sipped it as I leaned against the sink, looking out the back windows toward the ce-

ment steps. The only people who could have seen anything, had there been anything to see, would have been those across the street from the garage up above.

I carried the glass of milk through the house, the carefully dusted, well-polished house, setting it down to open closet doors and cabinet drawers I had opened before. I looked through the guest room and if some of the "young dude's" clothes had been in "that closet," there wasn't a button, not a thread or piece of lint, to be found there now . . . nor any missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. But those I had were coming together, forming a part of a picture. I almost knew. I *almost* knew what had happened and why.

The milk had not settled my stomach. I took the glass back to the kitchen and set it on the counter; then I turned to the basement door, unlocked and opened it, bent over the banister, and leaped back. The light was on! The light was on down there! I slammed the door and shot the bolt. *Then* I remembered that I myself had turned on the light; only this morning, a century ago, I had turned on the light.

The milk threatened to come up, with a chaser of brandy.

I went to the open front door and breathed deep of the hot Santa Ana wind. I knew I had

most of the pieces of the puzzle, and my mind picked them out, fitting them loosely together with cracks running through the picture so that Mama came out a frightened half-old, clutching half-young Little Bit, attempting to relive her happily indulgent married life, starting all over again with an identical Hawaiian honeymoon and a doting husband.

The wind was suffocating, so hot and heavy that when I breathed it in it acted like a plug to hold down the milk and brandy, and the horror of the cracked jigsaw puzzle I was putting together.

She must have known she'd have to parry and connive to turn such a young man from instructor to chauffeur to yard-and-house-man to husband-and-lover . . . and quickly, because she was old, and she must have known, deep down, that she was old so she had to hurry—too fast for a man who had fallen into plush surroundings, needing time to plan for the ripoff.

I breathed in the wind that corked the milk and brandy, knowing how it was, because I knew Mama, the frolicsome lass, the forever bride, reluctant mother, who wooed a man young enough to be her son. So she had to hold back—and another piece of the puzzle fell into place, cracked across the character.

She had to hold back on the money from Mr. Merrick . . . "We can travel," I could hear her tinkling voice: "Oh, we can travel anywhere. All I have to do is ask Mr. Merrick for the money—when the time is right . . ." and I wondered if Ralph Whoever knew what she was holding out for while he clipped the lawns and polished furniture, holding out himself.

Mama had to hurry, so she called the travel bureau to ask for the Romantic Hawaii brochures that she and her fiancé could study.

Three days ago.

I walked out into the wind. It was almost three o'clock and the sun slanted so that it shone against the basement windows on the west and I had to cup my palms around my eyes against the pane as I knelt on the finely clipped grass to see through. It was a moment or so before I could focus my eyes through the shadows of the dimly-lighted basement to the dark well under the staircase and see one pointed toe and stilt heel in the dust-filtered light.

I knelt there screaming, my screams bouncing with the wind against the garden walls, with no one to hear.

I lost the milk and the brandy at last, and fitted the final pieces of puzzle in place satisfactorily.

I walked back into the house and looked at the telephone book that wedged the door open. Then I dialed the operator and asked her to get the police department. "You can come now," I told them. "I have found the body."

The police have a case now—a three-day-old body and two-day-old clues.

I can tell them whom to search for—a young man with brown curly hair and the beginnings of a new beard (so new that one

might not notice or remember), slim, about five feet ten, driving a Cadillac or a trade-in for a Cadillac, with some money—not a ripoff bundle, but a slice of panic; a murderer if he pushed Mama down the basement steps, or an accessory if she fell down them on her stiletto heels as she pointed out their Hawaiian Honeymoon luggage.

As soon as I lay it all out for the police, I shall phone Jeff so he can run it halfway up the flagpole and see how it hangs.

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# Accounts Payable

by D. H. Reddall

I wasted part of the morning trying to solve a logic puzzle. According to the problem, seven guys using seven brooms can sweep up seven tons of sand in seven hours. I was supposed to figure out how long it would take ten guys using ten brooms to sweep up ten tons of sand.

Right away I rejected the obvious. They wouldn't have bothered to put the thing in the paper if the answer was ten hours. After kicking it around for awhile I lost interest, just like I used to lose interest in the sixth grade when trying, unsuccessfully, to solve problems involving Airplane A and Airplane B.

I tossed the paper aside just as the door opened, admitting a tall gangly number wearing a suit that had gone out of style with the big bands. He looked to be in his sixties, and from the scowl I figured he wasn't selling insurance.

"I'm lookin' for a Stubblefield."

"Congratulations. You just found one." He looked me over pretty closely for a minute, then lumbered over to the other chair.

"Name's Luther Kessler."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Kessler?"

He stared at me as if I were simple. "Why, you can get the animals that killed Earl."

"Who's Earl?"

"My brother. They killed him."

"Who did?"

"Now how would I know that? If I knew who killed him, do you suppose I'd be settin' here and jawin' with you?" He slapped the desk with a calloused palm. "They killed him. Blew him up on his doorstep."

I remembered then. It had been in the news a few weeks earlier. Earl Kessler had been bookkeeper for a local trucking outfit. He'd taken a vacation in Maine, rented a cabin on a lake, and the next morning had picked up a package that was left on the porch. The ensuing explosion had flattened the cabin and killed Kessler.

I said, "The police are working on it." Kessler nodded vigorously.

"I know they are. But there's nothing wrong with bringing in a freelance. Reckon a man like yourself might be able to find out things the police can't."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Cops don't appreciate having people blown up in their jurisdiction. They'll be motivated."

"Well, I'm damn well motivated myself. I come all the way up here because I want some justice done. And not next year, or the next life neither. Never did have any truck with that karma nonsense. I figure if there's any justice in this world you got to see to it yourself. Now, you interested or not?"

I was. It had seemed odd at the time that an anonymous bookkeeper from Cape Cod, an older man of modest means at that, should be the object of such an attack. It still seemed odd.

"Your brother have any enemies?"

"None I know of."

"Had he made any changes in his life recently, or done anything unusual?"

"I don't believe he had, but then I didn't see Earl much. I've been farming out to Illinois since '53, sort of lost touch." He shot me a look. "You ever work on a farm?" I said I hadn't. Kessler snorted.

"Figured not."

I let it go. Kessler struck me as the kind of guy who believed nothing of value had transpired in America since 1945. Hell, he could be right, but I didn't want to get into it.

"All right, Mr. Kessler." I slid

a pad and small pencil across the desk. "Write down where I can reach you."

He paused in his scribbling. "Another thing. Maybe you've noticed what a mess the courts are in these days, all them killers and drug fiends walking away free on account of the liberals all the time hollering about their 'rights.'" He jabbed the pencil at me. "You find the people blew Earl up, don't waste the taxpayers' time and money, if you know what I mean."

I assured him that I understood, took his retainer, and saw him on his way.

Bob Gilliat was a corporal in the state police. We'd played basketball together in high school and had managed to stay in touch in the years since. We were sitting at the counter in the Rudder.

"The bomb was heavy duty, Charles. Gelignite. Completely erased the cabin. There wasn't enough left of Kessler to use for bait."

"Time device?"

"Uh-uh. Motion sensor. Mercury switch. Very tricky, but once Kessler picked it up he was a dead man." Gilliat took a bite of his eggs. "Jesus, what is this, rubber cement?"

Floyd strolled by, wiping his hands on a filthy towel.

"What do you time your eggs with, Floyd, a calendar?" I asked.

He gave me a disgusted look. "And who styles your hair, Charles? Your gardener?"

Gilliat grinned. "You guys been married long?"

"Say, Floyd. I'm having trouble with this puzzle." I recited the problem of the ten guys moving the ten tons of sand. He hardly missed a beat.

"That's simple, Charles. It takes them seven hours. A schoolboy could have figured that out." He smiled smugly and disappeared into his kitchen.

Yeah. A schoolboy. I tried not to appear too humiliated.

"Any motive for someone swacking Kessler?"

"No. He was a nonentity: widower, bookkeeper, quiet, small-time all the way. No bad habits, no known enemies." He took a tentative sip of his coffee. "The way we figure it, the bomb was meant for someone else."

"Why?"

"Well, it's early in the season yet, and there were only two other cabins rented: couple of old guys up for the fishing. And Kessler. But here's the interesting thing. The owner said that he gave Kessler a cabin that had been vacated just that morning. Seems that a homeboy, guy named Richard Manso from Provincetown, reserved the cabin for two weeks but only stayed a

couple of days, then checked out." He paused to bang some ketchup onto a pile of greasy fries.

"Manso is a part-time fisherman and a full-time drug dealer: coke and pot mostly, some steroids. Been arrested a couple of times. Used to be a dealer and also a thief in New York before gracing our peninsula with his presence."

"What was he doing in Hayshaker, Maine?"

Gilliat shrugged. "He told the camp owner that he was up for the fishing, getting away from the girlfriend for a couple of weeks. We haven't proved otherwise, mainly because we haven't been able to locate him. Yet."

It seemed right. Small-time dealer gets too ambitious, maybe rips off the wrong people. Goes to northern Maine to cool off, but doesn't go far enough. Someone, from either New York or the Cape, had been very angry with him.

Gilliat reached for his coffee, thought better of it, and downed a glass of water instead. "Looks like a mistake was made. It's happened before. What's your interest here, Charles?"

"Kessler's brother. He wants to make sure justice is served."

Gilliat raised an eyebrow. "Justice?"

I shrugged. "I have no prob-

lem with revenge. It's an honest emotion, and it helps balance the books a little."

"You're starting to sound like a courthouse shrink, Charles. You know, the kind that hums a little Austrian waltz on his way to the witness stand to testify on behalf of some kink who sprayed the post office with an Uzi. 'It vas, you see, a vay for dis conflicted man to lash out at the fadda figure—'"

I picked up the check, thanked Bob, and headed for my car.

**A** couple of hours later I was in Provincetown. I started at Manso's last known address, an apartment just off Commercial Street. I was met at the door by a thin, tired-looking woman wearing jeans and a tie-dyed T-shirt. When I asked for Manso, she snarled three words at me, two of them rather impolite, and slammed the door.

It went downhill from there. No one knew where Manso was, if they admitted to knowing him at all. I'd expected it. This was a small, tight-knit community where outsiders asking questions are routinely shut out. I ended the day with nothing but sore feet to show for my efforts.

The next day was more of the same, and by midafternoon I'd had enough and headed for the Windjammer for a beer. The

'Jammer was the place of last resort for the fishermen and tradesmen in a town overrun by restaurants featuring salmon *en croûte*, medallions of pork in sweet potato sauce, and fusilli with capers and sun-dried tomatoes. Shot and a beer, pork rinds, maybe a burger—that was the order of the day in the Windjammer. I got a beer and settled into a booth.

I'd lived in Provincetown for awhile a few years earlier, and I still knew some people. One of them was Phil Cook, a personal injury lawyer specializing in dogbite cases and Jack Daniel's. Especially Jack Daniel's.

"You aren't getting any better looking, Charles," he said, sitting down across the knife-scarred table from me.

"It's indelicate of you to say so, Phil. How's the ambulance-chasing business?"

He shrugged. "*Sero venientibus ossa*," my friend."

"Say what?"

"For latecomers the bones." Or, to put it in the common vernacular, with which you are no doubt more conversant, "You snooze, you lose." He signaled for another drink. "Business is, unfortunately, a bit slow at the moment, although the bills arrive with depressing punctuality. It is the usual case of '*a fronte praecipitum a tergo lupi*,' I fear."

"Philly, can you for chrissake speak English?"

He shook his gray head sadly. "I said there is a precipice before me and wolves behind. Don't they still teach Latin in the schools?"

"They don't even use it in church any more, Phil. Decline of the empire and all that." The waitress brought his drink and made a point of waiting for the money.

"And you, Charles. What brings you to town. Beach getaway?"

"I'm looking for a guy named Richard Manso. Know him?" There was the slightest pause as he brought the glass to his mouth.

"Nope. Never heard the name." He sloshed whisky around in his mouth and swallowed. I waited a long minute.

"Maybe you remember a disgruntled fellow—what was his name—Starr. As I recall, couple of years back you owed him some money. He was threatening—correct me if I'm wrong here—to make you so ugly that you'd have to tie a porkchop around your neck before a dog would even come near you."

"That barbarian!" He looked up from under his bushy eyebrows. "So it was you that cooled Starr out?" I didn't say anything. He threw back the rest of his drink.

"You're a romantic, Charles. You were born several hundred years too late. This is not a propitious point in history in which to practice the romantic's trade. We live in an age when minds are beclouded by materialism and greed. 'Things are in the saddle and ride mankind,' quoth the poet."

"You sit there jabbering in Latin and quoting poetry, and you tell me *I'm a romantic?*"

Cook burped, got up, and made ready to leave. "By the way, Charles, do you remember the *Laura B*, Manny Cordeiro's old dragger?" I nodded. "Well, Manny died, and the boat's been on the beach for over a year. Word has it that a couple of the local wharf rats have taken to living aboard her." He gave me a sloppy salute.

"Have a care, Charles. *Homo homini lupus.* Man is, indeed, a wolf to man."

**T**he *Laura B* lay bathed in moonlight not far from Macara's Wharf, her hull warped and her blue paint chipping. From my position among the pilings I had a clear view of the boat. Phil's advice had been oblique, but I knew him well enough to follow it up.

I had no plan as such. I just figured on bracing Manso if and when he returned to the boat. He'd be easy enough to spot:

Gilliat had described him as big, blond, and bearded, with a tattoo circling his left forearm that said "Hellraiser" in old English script. Bob also advised me that Manso enjoyed hitting people.

It was twelve twenty. The bars didn't close until one. I settled down to wait.

Twenty minutes later Manso walked out of the shadows and onto the beach. I couldn't see the tattoo, but the rest fit. I called his name and he swung around to face me.

"Who are you?"

"Easy. I just want to talk to you."

He sighed and shrugged. "Cop, right?"

"Private cop." His piggish eyes widened a bit at that.

"Oh, a private cop." He moved towards me. "That's different. I don't have to talk to a private cop if I don't want to." He looked past me, around the beach, to see if I was alone.

"Might save you some grief if you do."

"You think so?"

I nodded.

"Know what I think? I think cops are the lowest form of life on the planet. Lower than whale crap, and that's on the bottom of the ocean." He had been drinking, and it hadn't done anything for his disposition.

"And I think I'll teach you to mind your own business." As he

spoke he charged, swinging a beefy right hand at my head. I slipped the punch and hit him in the solar plexus with a right hook. He doubled over with a grunt and fell to the sand, struggling for breath. When he got it, he swore a bit and sat up.

"Now about that talk."

"Screw you."

"Be smart. The sooner the cops nail whoever blew up the cabin, the better for you. Somebody's serious about folding your hand."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Come on, Manso. The guys that missed you in Maine aren't going to give up."

He shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about, man. Nobody's looking for me except the cops, and most of them couldn't find their ass with both hands and a road map."

"You don't know what happened in Maine after you left?"

"No, man. I don't know nothin'. I called the old lady third day I was there. There was a beef back here needed attention. I came back, took care of it. Right away the law's on my case. I figured it had to do with this beef: I had to lay a beating on a guy. So I been keeping a low profile."

I told him about Kessler. He thought it over for a minute.

"Look, Ace, I got enemies, but nothin' heavy like that."

"You sure?"

He got up and wiped sand off his clothes. "You think I'd be walking around out here, alone at night, no weapon, nothin'? Man, guys with bombs were looking for me, I'd be in goddam Australia. Yeah, I'm sure. You got the wrong guy."

I believed him. As I had with the logic puzzle, I'd rejected the obvious. Only this time I'd made a mistake. The bomber had gotten the right man.

**T**he cops released the contents of Earl Kessler's apartment to his brother. I picked Luther up and we drove over there.

Earl Kessler had lived modestly. There were the bare necessities and not much more: a television, a few prints on the walls, a couple of dozen books, mostly on fishing and nature related topics.

I don't know what I expected to find, but I gave the place a thorough toss. I even checked the undersides of the drawers, dumped out the coffee and the sugar, and unrolled the toilet paper and looked inside the cardboard tube.

"You reckon there's a clue hidden there in the bumfodder?" Kessler's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"You got an idea, maybe?"

"That's what I pay you for," he snapped. "Bright ideas."

"Well, I'm fresh out. There's no loose end to tug on here. Your brother lived like a monk: no vices, no girlfriend, no close friends at all. He didn't even play cards or belong to a club."

"He fished. He loved the outdoors. Always did."

"Well, he loved it alone, looks like."

"Never understood it myself."

"What?"

"Fishing. Damned silly waste of time, and cruel besides. Fishing, hunting, trapping—cruel."

"What's the difference between raising deer and raising cows?"

"I got no livestock, mister. Corn and soybeans. No animals, save for my dog and a couple of barn cats. I couldn't live with an animal only to send it off to slaughter. No, sir, I couldn't."

"Corn and soybeans?"

"Yep."

"No endive?"

"What's endive?"

"Never mind. It's a bad Massachusetts joke."

We left no closer to Earl's killers than when we came, but I liked Luther rather more than I had before."

**W**e drove to the industrial park and found the offices of Four-Lane Trucking. Kessler waited in the

car. A receptionist passed me in to Ralph McIntyre without delay.

McIntyre's office was functional: no chrome or leather or exotic wood, just a steel cubicle with a steel desk. A piston served as a paperweight, a miniature truck tire as an ashtray. The owner of Four-Lane Trucking was a large man with a military haircut. He lit a Camel and I asked my questions.

"Nah. Earl never mentioned anything about any problems. But then he was pretty quiet. Good bookkeeper, and naturally, we're sorry as hell about what happened." He took a long drag on the Camel, reducing fully half of it to ash.

"Any idea as to who would conceivably want to kill him?"

"Nobody'd want to kill Earl. It had to be a mistake. They were looking to clip someone else, way I figure it." Another drag, the cigarette was gone. He saw me looking. "Filthy habit. I been trying to quit for years."

"It wasn't a mistake."

"What wasn't?"

"The bomb. Kessler was the intended target."

McIntyre squinted at me. "You prove that?"

"Not yet," I said, getting up, "but I will. Something smells in this whole thing. I intend to find out what it is." I hoped McIntyre

wouldn't ask me how I planned to do it. I didn't have an answer.

"Yeah, well, if I can help let me know, Stubblefield. Anything I can do, you know." I thanked him and saw myself out. The receptionist flashed me a dazzling smile with all the sincerity of a campaign promise.

"You have a nice day now."

"How well did you know Kessler?"

"Well, I've been here a little over three years, so that long."

"He strike you as the kind of man who might have a secret life?"

"Mr. Kessler? No way." She smiled at the suggestion.

"I get the impression the man was a saint. Didn't he, say, ever make a pass at you?"

She did something you don't see too much any more. She blushed.

"Go on! He never."

"A perfect gentleman. Never even lost his temper, I'll bet."

"We-e-ll, I've seen him lose his temper a few times."

"At the boss?"

"Oh no, never that. It was whenever there was an oil spill or something like that. He was savage over that big Exxon thing in Canada."

"Alaska."

"Yeah, Alaska. Whatever. And that business with the loggers and the little owl. That kind of thing made him very upset. He

used to say that we had no right to do those things, that they were crimes against nature."

I wished her a nice day and started for the door.

"Oh, Mr. Stubblefield, maybe you should know, being a policeman and all."

"Private investigator."

"Right, whatever. Anyway, Mr. Stoller, the man that owns the camp up in Maine where Mr. Kessler got—where he died—he called while you were with Mr. McIntyre. He wanted to know what to do about Mr. Kessler's car. He seems to think it might be valuable."

I walked out into the late afternoon sun. A plane was coming in for a landing, and the birds were scattering as if it were a huge hawk. It was a long drive, and it was grasping at straws, but the car was the last possible place I could think of to look for evidence bearing on Kessler's murder.

**L**uther Kessler and I left the following morning and arrived at the Pine Lodge Cabins late that afternoon. The whole way Kessler provided a running commentary on what was wrong with America. His thesis seemed to be that our economic situation could only worsen. The reason for this decline, he said, was that the people who fought in World War II

were the last generation of Americans who knew how to work, or even wanted to work. Now that they were all reaching retirement age the future of the Republic rested in the hands of hippies, dope fiends, welfare cheats, and other assorted wastrels. It was a long nine hours.

The cabins were all unoccupied. We decided to take one for the night and drive back the next day. Kessler checked out the cabin while Mrs. Stoller pointed out the car and gave me the keys.

I saw what Stoller meant by valuable. Kessler's car was a 1939 Studebaker Commander in near mint condition. Not the most graceful automobile ever made, but compared to the anonymous little boxes on the road today, it was a thing of rare beauty.

I looked in the trunk, under the mats, behind the visors, and then, sinking into the plushly upholstered front seat, I went through the glove compartment. In a folder containing the owner's manual was a sheaf of papers, mostly gasoline receipts and maintenance bills. I rifled through them and had started to put them back when one caught my attention. It was an accident report dated two months earlier. One vehicle belonged to a Kenneth Marduk of Sherman Mills, Maine, a town not far

from the lake. The other was a truck registered to Four-Lane Trucking.

I looked through the rest of the papers more carefully. There were photocopies of a number of fuel receipts stretching back over a period of four months, all for Four-Lane Trucking, all from the same station in Island Falls, also nearby.

As bookkeeper, Earl Kessler had processed the company's bills. But why had he kept copies of these? And what had brought him here for his vacation?

It was getting dark as I headed for the cabin. Kessler was just coming out.

"Wonderin' where you were." I held the papers out to him. "I think we've got something. Have a look at these." As he reached for them a shot rang out from the trees. Kessler whirled and fell.

"Godamighty! Godamighty!" he cried over and over. I hit the ground and rolled to the nearest cover, a pair of stumps used as chopping blocks. Two more shots kicked wood chips in my face as I ducked behind the stumps. Kessler was still down, holding his neck.

"Kessler, get out of there!" He had the presence of mind to scramble across to the cabin and under the porch. I pulled out my Browning and tried to see our

assailant, but it was too dark to make anything out in the dense trees forty yards distant.

"What the hell's going on here?" It was Stoller, coming around the cabin and into the lamplit zone of fire.

Before I could yell a warning, a bullet tore some wood off the cabin by Stoller's head. He swore and ducked back around the corner.

This time I saw the muzzle flash. I fired at it and immediately bracketed it with four more rounds, rapid fire. Part of a tree detached itself and fell to the ground groaning. For a minute there was no other sound in the clearing. Then a voice,

"Okay, that's it." A pause. "I'm bleeding bad."

"Throw the gun out here." A rifle bounced and slid on the pine needles. I crawled forward, unwilling to stand until I was sure he had no more weapons.

McIntyre lay curled on the ground. I called to Stoller and told him to get a first aid kit and start with Kessler. One of my slugs had furrowed McIntyre's thigh. A second had smashed his shoulder. I packed the wounds and waited for Stoller.

"The wife's with your buddy. He's got a crease in his neck, not serious. Who is this guy?"

McIntyre glared at me. "Lucky, Stubblefield. You're one lucky bastard." He grimaced in pain.

"Hit me at that distance with a damn automatic."

"Not lucky, McIntyre. I practice."

"Lucky bastard."

"Yeah. Well, like the man says: the more I practice the luckier I get."

**T**he lunch crowd at the Rudder was thinning out. Floyd was sitting with Kessler and me, taking a breather from his tiny kitchen.

"These people regulars, Floyd?"

"Most of them."

"Amazing."

"What's amazing?"

"That they don't all rise up in concert against you some afternoon to give vent to their gastric distress."

"Charles, how long have you been eating here? Seven, eight years?"

"Something like that."

"Why? If the offerings of my humble victualry don't appeal to you, why don't you eat somewhere else?"

"Food here's good," said Kessler, mopping up gravy with his bread.

"Compared to what?" I asked. Bob Gilliat joined us at the table.

"So, fill me in, Charles."

"McIntyre spilled his guts when he realized he was facing a murder charge for Kessler,

never mind the rest of it. He didn't plant the bomb, though."

"Who did?" said Kessler, wiping his chin. I shrugged.

"Some soldier from New Jersey. McIntyre was doing business with the mob. He was contacted by a firm that needed some hauling done. Discreetly."

"Toxic waste," said Gilliat.

"Right. They hired a number of small outfits that were already doing business in Jersey. Four-Lane was one of them. McIntyre's trucks would haul legitimate cargo into the state, unload, then swing by another location and load up with barrels of God-knows-what. They were told to pick an isolated area in Maine and simply dump the stuff in the woods."

"How did Kessler get onto it?"

"Fuel bills, a minor accident report, all from the same place in Maine. Four-Lane didn't do any business in Maine, you see, so Kessler probably figured one of the drivers was skylarking, had a girlfriend up there, something. He must have brought it to McIntyre's attention and was told to forget it."

"But then more bills came in. Kessler may have gone to McIntyre again, I don't know. We do know that he became suspicious. He took the trouble to copy the fuel bills and conceal them among his own papers. Somewhere along the line he

must have put two and two together and decided to see for himself. He loved the outdoors, and the possibility of illegal dumping of toxic waste would have been anathema to him. So he took the cabin, but before he had a chance to nose around, he got taken out."

"But," said Kessler, "how did they get to him so fast?"

I shrugged. "He must have slipped up, not realizing the full extent of the danger he was in. He may have mentioned to someone at work where he was going. Word got back to McIntyre, who panicked and called the organization in Jersey."

Gilliat shook his head. "Clumsy way to do it. A fishing accident would have been neater." He glanced at Kessler to see if he had offended him.

"Who knows, maybe they figured a bomb would put the cops off the track by suggesting a shady past, or a case of mistaken identity, which in fact it did." Floyd started gathering up the dishes.

"Say, Floyd," I said. "You did such a bang-up job on that logic puzzle, I was wondering if you'd help me out with another one."

"Certainly, Charles. What is it?"

"Well, there are these two airplanes: Airplane A and Airplane B—"

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# Summer Evil

by Nora H. Caplan

The drive, almost obscured by flanking bridal wreath, lilacs, and forsythia, followed one boundary line of the property to a stone building that had once been a barn. Between that and the house was a boxwood hedge pruned to a height of six feet.

The house was built in the early 1830's. It was a small, two story cottage of red brick with a slate roof and huge central chimney. Weathered green shutters framed the windows and recessed front door. Beyond the swell of pin oaks and pines sheltering the site lay Sugar Loaf Mountain. And beyond that, a hazy suggestion of the Catotin range.

From the moment they first saw the house, Phyllis had a watchful feeling about it. As if she expected some major obstacle to prevent their buying it. But the price was incredibly within their means; Ben had no objection to driving thirty-five miles in to Washington; and the county school Kate would attend had a fine reputation.

One night shortly after they'd moved in, Phyllis and Ben were sitting on the steps of the back

porch, watching Kate gather grass for a jarful of lightning bugs, her bangs damp with concentration. The sun had almost gone down, and there was a faint mist rising from the creek that crossed the back of their land. The air seemed to be layered with both warmth and coolness, pungent with sweet grass and pennyroyal.

"I'd feel a lot easier in my mind," Phyllis said to Ben, "if we'd discover even one thing wrong about all this. People like us just don't find one-hundred-twenty-five-year-old homes in perfect condition for twenty-three thousand."

Ben folded the sports page and leaned back against her knees. "It's pretty far out here, and most families wouldn't consider a two bedroom house." Then he added dryly, "Besides, I've never liked the way old houses smell. I noticed it about this one, too, right off."

"I've told you a hundred times, it's the boxwood. That's what the smell is, not the house, darling. Anyway, you'll have to get used to it. I have absolutely no intention of getting rid of that

hedge. Mrs. Gastell said it's as old as the house."

Ben grinned as he turned and looked up at her. "Then would you at least trust me to spray it? There are spiderwebs all over the stuff."

"You'd better check with that nurseryman first, just to be sure. What's his name . . ." Phyllis pulled a letter from the pocket of her jamaicas and glanced through it. "Newton. He's just this side of the bridge in Gaithersburg."

"Who's the letter from? The old lady?" Phyllis nodded. "What'd she have to say?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just that she's getting settled, and she thinks she'll like Florida. Every other word is about her granddaughter. I guess the real reason she wrote was to remind us to put in a new furnace filter this fall. A few other things like that." Phyllis frowned. "There's a part here at the end I couldn't quite figure out."

She handed Ben the letter.

He scanned the page and then handed it back. "What's so mysterious about this? All old people take a proprietary air about everybody else's kid. Personally, I don't know why she's so worried about the creek. It's not more than a foot deep. There's no danger of Kate's getting drowned. And I haven't seen

any snakes down there—not up to now, I haven't."

"Well, it's not only what she said in the letter. It's the way she's acted about Kate since she saw her. Almost as if she wouldn't have sold the house to us if she'd known we had a child. But I'm sure I mentioned Kate to her the first time we came out with the agent."

Ben lit a cigarette. "Maybe she thought Katie would tear up the place."

"No, it wasn't that. In fact, several times I told her how we've taken Kate to all kinds of museums and historic homes, and how she's always been careful with valuable old things. But Mrs. Gastell hardly paid any attention at all to me. She kept saying Katie shouldn't be allowed to wander all over the place by herself."

Ben shrugged. "Mrs. Gastell's seventy years old. People her age think we give our kids too much freedom. That's all she meant."

Their daughter had abandoned the lightning bugs and was now making hollyhock dolls, lining them chorus-fashion across the brick path to the grape arbor. Her shorts were grass-stained and the soles of her bare feet were already seasoned a greenish-rust. Ben reflected on her a moment and then he said, "I guess it will be

hard on Katie, being alone so much now. It might be a good idea to get acquainted pretty soon with the people around here."

Phyllis leaned her elbows on his shoulders. "That's the trouble. Nobody on this road has children her age. But it's only six weeks until school starts. And in the meantime, there's plenty around here to keep her occupied. The two of us can start all kinds of projects. I can't describe what a wonderful feeling it is, not to have people running in for coffee all day long or the phone ringing every ten minutes. Everybody knows this is a toll call, thank goodness. Maybe now I can start on the book."

Ben stood up abruptly. "No, you don't. Not after what you went through with that last story. Remember, you promised me you wouldn't do a thing for the rest of the summer."

She took his hand. "I didn't mean anytime soon. I only meant now that we've moved. I promise not to write a word until we're all settled and Kate's in school." She called to the child, "I'm going to start your bath now, so don't be long."

"In a minute," Kate said automatically. "Daddy, come here. I made seven pink ones with white hats, and seven white ones with pink hats, and . . ."

Phyllis smiled and went into

the kitchen. She turned on the brass lamp over the round pine table. The planked floor gleamed with a fresh coat of wax. It was a low ceiled room, full of early morning sunshine and pine-shaded in the afternoon. Women years before her had stood at her window and cleaned berries, kneaded bread, stamped butter with a thistle-patterned mold. Perhaps the room had given them moments of completeness, as it gave her now when she poured milk into a brown earthenware pitcher and set it beside a bowl of tawny nasturtiums.

Then, as she was slightly bent over the table, one hand on the pitcher, Phyllis had the sensation that this room, the whole house, had an inexplicable fullness. That the very atmosphere had absorbed a century and a half of other lives. It reminded her of an incredible camera she had once read about—one that recorded, through heat radiations, images from the past, that were of course invisible to the naked eye. There was something about this house that seemed to retain, at times even emanate, certain . . . presences. And it was not a feeling that came from any conscious attempt to visualize previous occupants. Somehow this thought disturbed her.

She let go of the pitcher and

went into the bathroom. The sound of water rushing from the faucet partially distracted her from whatever had bothered her and she dumped half a jar of bubble soap into the tub. Kate would love her extravagance.

The following day the Reverend Mr. White, rector of St. Steven's Church, called. He had the same cheery roundness as a Toby jug, smoked good Havanas, and produced a box of licorice cough drops for Kate. Before he left, he told Kate to bring her parents to church Sunday. It'd be a good way for her to make new friends, too.

Until the mail came at eleven, Phyllis had planned to spend the afternoon with Kate, repainting her doll shelves. But she received a letter from her agent. *Woman's World* was interested in her revised manuscript, but they had decided the climax was still weak. She felt a familiar, obsessive pressure to get the work finished as soon as possible.

"I'm sorry, darling," she told Kate after lunch. "But I'm going to have to type for awhile."

Kate's gray eyes clouded. "I got everything ready out on the back porch."

"I know, but I'd be all on edge if I tried to do anything before this gets done. You run on out-

side now. Take your dolls down to the arbor. Or ride your bike."

"Couldn't I start painting anyway? I'd be careful."

"You'd have the whole porch smeared up and get paint all over your hair. Remember what happened the last time I left you alone with a paintbrush?" She pushed Kate away gently. "Go on, now. I'll try not to be long."

Phyllis had already taken the cover off the typewriter. She didn't hear Kate leave the house and walk down the path to the creek.

Whether it was because she hadn't written for weeks or because it was hard to concentrate in new surroundings; the story just wouldn't come off right. Before she started the third draft, she looked at the clock. Five thirty, and she hadn't even taken the meat from the freezer. Then she remembered Kate. Phyllis called upstairs and didn't get an answer. She went out on the porch. Kate wasn't in the arbor. She called louder.

Finally, from under the willows beside the creek, Kate appeared. She ran toward the house, pigtails flapping wildly. Phyllis hugged her. "I was beginning to get worried. Didn't you hear me calling and calling you?"

Kate's face was vibrant. "We were playing. Is dinner ready?"

She pulled away from her mother and threw open the screen door.

Phyllis followed after her. "By the time you get washed and set the table, it will be." As she was searching the refrigerator for something to fix in a hurry, she thought of what Kate had said. She asked curiously, "Were you playing with someone?"

Katie turned toward her with a handful of silver, and her eyes glowed. "Her name's Letty. She's just my age. Seven and a half. Only her birthday's in December. I guess that makes her a little bit older."

Phyllis sliced some cheese. "Where does she live?"

"I don't know," Kate said. "But she showed me how to make a cat's-cradle. It's a trick you do with string. Want me to show you?"

Her fingers were still grubby.

"Young lady, you were supposed to wash your hands."

"I did."

"Well, take another look. And use plenty of soap this time."

She heard Ben pull into the drive. She hoped he was in a good mood. As a rule, he didn't like grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner.

Kate didn't mention her doll shelves the following day. Right after breakfast, she told her mother that she was going down to the creek. Letty might be

there. In a way, Phyllis was glad. She could have the morning free to work without any twinges of guilt over Katie's having nothing to do. She wrote until noon.

Katie came in long enough to wash down a peanut butter sandwich with lemonade. Then she wanted to be off again, telling her mother before she left, "Letty said she might have to go into Washington City tomorrow to visit her aunt. So we're trying to finish our doll house this afternoon. Can I take her some cookies?"

Phyllis wrapped a handful in a paper napkin. A phrase Katie had used reverberated queerly. "Did Letty mean her aunt lives in Washington, D. C.?"

The girl stuffed two plastic cups into a paper bag. "I guess so. Letty says she loves to go there. Her mother always packs a lunch and they stop off by the canal locks to eat. I asked her if I could go, too, but she said there wouldn't be room." Kate filled the thermos with milk. "What's a gig, Mommy?"

Phyllis hesitated. "It's some kind of carriage, I think. Why?"

Kate started past her. "Oh. Well, I'd better go now."

Phyllis caught at her arm. "Look, why don't you bring Letty up here to play? You'd have lots of fun, showing her all your things. I feel funny about the

two of you being down there all alone."

"Why do you feel funny? You could hear us if anything happened." Then she said evasively, "Letty's kind of shy. I already asked her to come inside, but she won't. She said her mother wouldn't like it."

Phyllis snapped, "What does her mother think we are, anyway? I never heard of anybody being so . . . so provincial."

Katie squirmed. "Letty's not like that. She's nice. Honest, she is."

Her mother released her. "All right, but don't go any farther away than the creek."

Perversely, now she wished Kate weren't so wrapped up in this other child. She felt like taking a break herself. It would be nice for the two of them to work in the garden or bake something special like eclairs. There weren't any excuses now for not being with her daughter as much as she liked. Phyllis poured another cup of coffee. She stared at the white linen curtains in the living room gently breathing in, then out against the low sills. Finally, she went back to the typewriter.

Later she decided to walk down to the creek. She could hear Kate chattering away. When she pushed aside the trailing willow branches, she saw only her child.

Kate looked up. "Hi. Letty just went over to the woods to get some more ferns. See, we're making a rock garden . . ."

Eddies were still swirling in the stream from a recent wading, but Phyllis couldn't detect any movement among the trees beyond.

For a time, Kate was eager to tell her mother and father all about Letty. Gradually, however, she divulged less and less. She sensed that something about her friend made her mother uneasy.

"I'd swear this child was all in her imagination," Phyllis told Ben one night as they were getting ready for bed. "But she's really there . . . or was, until I show up. I mean, the things they do together are really there. Like checkers and doll dishes and scrapbooks."

Ben surveyed his face in the mirror. He leaned closer. "More gray hairs. Will you love me in December as you do in May?"

Phyllis put down her face cream. "Haven't you been listening?"

He turned around. "Sure, I have. It just seems to me that you're the one with the imagination, not Kate. This friend of hers is all right, I guess. From what I gather, her folks must belong to some kind of offbeat religious sect or something. You

know how strict they are with their kids. They're pretty slow about taking up with outsiders, too."

"I never thought of that." Phyllis massaged her face.

Ben got into bed and folded his arms behind his head. "Why don't you take Kate into town tomorrow? Have lunch at Garfinckel's and go to a movie."

She turned out the light. "Maybe I'll do that if I can tear her away from Letty."

He pulled her into the curve of his arm. "See, you're tired of country living already. All I had to do was mention town, and you're ready to go."

She didn't rise to the bait. Her voice was unsure. "Nothing's ever the way you think it's going to be." A car passed on the road. Then, except for the frogs down in the creek, there was no sound other than the soft brush of a pine bough against the window. Phyllis moved closer to Ben. He seemed to be asleep already, and she wouldn't wake him just to say she was afraid, for no particular reason.

The trip to town had to be called off. Kate was listless the next morning and complained of a headache. Phyllis was almost relieved. Now she could insist on Kate's staying indoors. She walked with Ben to the car.

"I don't think it's anything

serious," she said, "but Kate is running a fever so I'll call the doctor. The Warrens told me the name of a good pediatrician near Poolesville."

He kissed her and turned on the ignition. "Give me a ring after lunch. I'm sorry about today, honey. It would've done you both a lot of good to get away for a change."

She smiled. "I don't mind. Kate and I can watch TV, and I'll make something special for lunch."

But Kate was irritable all day, and her fever rose that afternoon. She talked about Letty incessantly. She was obsessed with the idea that Letty might never come back. By the time the doctor arrived, Phyllis was exhausted. He reassured her. "I think she's getting German measles. I've had a dozen cases within the last week. Just give her aspirin and keep her in bed for a few days."

He was right. By Tuesday Kate was almost well. Phyllis remembered a dinner party she'd promised they would attend on Wednesday. She wanted to cancel it, but Ben said, "Kate's all right now. Why don't you ask Mrs. Warren to come over and watch her. You told me she'd offered to sit for us."

Phyllis agreed reluctantly. Just before they left, she told Mrs. Warren, "Please call us if

anything comes up. I feel uneasy about leaving her."

The older woman propelled her toward the door. "Go on and enjoy yourselves. I brought up six children. Katie and me'll make out just fine."

It was almost eleven when they returned. Mrs. Warren was asleep, completely erect in the wing chair. Phyllis tiptoed over to her.

The woman's eyes flew open. She got up hastily. "Didn't even hear you come in," she said. "I'm so used to going to bed at sundown, I must've dozed off."

"I'm sorry we've kept you up so late." Phyllis glanced up the stairs. "How's Kate?"

"Not a peep out of her since I tucked her in."

After Ben drove off with Mrs. Warren, Phyllis went upstairs. Just as she reached the landing, she saw the light go out under Kate's door. Before she even entered the room, she was sure something was off balance. "You're playing possum, missy," she whispered in the dark. The child didn't answer. Phyllis turned on the bedside lamp.

Kate's eyes were enormous, her mouth fixed in a tight, unnatural smile. She lay rigid, the covers pulled up to her chin.

Phyllis sat down on the bed. "What's the matter, honey?" She touched Kate's forehead. It was cool.

"I'm all right." Kate flinched under her hand.

She folded back the sheet and blanket and said lightly, "Well, you'll smother, all bundled up like that."

Kate fumbled at the collar of her pajamas, but Phyllis saw what she was trying to conceal—a string of red beads. She took Kate's hand away, and inspected the strand. It was coral, curiously strung in an even pattern of six large, then six small beads. "Where did you get this?"

The child avoided her eyes. "Letty gave it to me. She said it'd keep me from getting the pox."

"Keep you from . . ." Phyllis drew in her breath sharply. *But all the doors had been locked and there were screens on the windows.*

Kate took one of her braids and rolled the rubber band on its end back and forth between her thumb and forefinger. "Letty was afraid you might get mad at her. But all we did was play. I promised to sleep late tomorrow." She added as Phyllis stared dully at her, "Look what Letty made for me. Isn't it neat?"

Phyllis took the paper doll. It was crudely drawn, but there were certain significant details. The hair wasn't penciled in exaggerated curls; it was shown parted in the middle and knotted on top. Even the features

were strange. There had been no attempt, obviously no knowledge of how, to indicate mascaraed eyelashes or a conventionally full, lipsticked mouth.

She turned it over. There was printing on the back. It appeared to be an advertisement of a sale, probably livestock. The paper was cheap rag that would yellow quickly, but it was now crisp and white, the type starkly black. Then she saw two words that formed part of the doll's shoes. *Healthy wench*. She felt nauseated as she realized that this wasn't a handbill for a cattle auction at all.

Phyllis could only ask, "Where did Letty get this paper? Was it something she found in an attic or . . ." She faltered, then repeated, "Where did she get this piece of paper?"

Kate took the doll from her and smoothed down the upward curl of the slippers. Quite easily she said, "In town. Last week. A man in the market was passing them out to everybody. Letty's father got her a whole bunch to draw on. She gave me some, too. Look."

But Phyllis knew that a sheaf of slave auction circulars and a nineteenth century paper doll and a coral talisman were not enough to convince Ben. No matter how much evidence was presented to him, he would never accept the fact that there could

be no scientific explanation for Letty. Nor would anyone else. Except perhaps Mrs. Gastell.

The real significance of the episode, though, was that Letty had ventured into the house for the first time. Having once achieved this, she would become more and more sure of herself until . . .

From that night on, Phyllis resolved never again to mention the name Letty or refer to her in any way—at least, not to Kate. She thought that if she refused to accept Letty's existence, eventually Kate would, also. She tried to keep her daughter occupied as much as possible. But if she took a shower or tried to write a letter, Kate slipped down to the creek. Always Phyllis would discover her alone, with a look of annoyance on her face that Letty and she had been interrupted.

"We'll just have to move, that's all," Phyllis told Ben finally. "I can't keep this up much longer."

He handed her a tall gin and tonic. "I still think you're making too much out of the whole thing. You know what vivid imaginations kids have. This is probably just Kate's way of compensating for the lack of other children to play with. I don't doubt at all that Letty is real to her, but for you to accept her as

some kind of ghost is . . ." Ben took her hand and rubbed it between his. "It's unhealthy, honey."

There was no sensation of warmth in her hand. She said tonelessly, "Yesterday I found . . . there's a grave in St. Steven's churchyard. It's hers . . . Letty's. She died of smallpox in 1844. She was only eight years old."

Ben studied the slice of lemon drifting sluggishly around the bottom of his drink. She was too numb even to speculate on what he was thinking.

Indirectly, it was Mr. White who provided a solution. Phyllis had invited him to dinner one night in late August. Afterwards they went out to the back porch, and he lit a panatella. The aroma of it blended with the smell of wild honeysuckle from the woods. He began a discussion on ancient rites of the church. One that he mentioned pricked Phyllis into complete awareness. *Exorcism. The driving away of evil spirits.*

She leaned forward. "Mr. White, would it be possible for such a rite to be performed now . . . in the present day?"

Ben spoke up, "Phyllis, I don't think . . ."

Mr. White removed his cigar. "There's nothing the matter with a question like that at all. In

fact, exorcism has always fascinated me. The last case I remember reading about occurred . . . let me see . . ."

Phyllis interrupted, "But could it be practiced now? Could you . . . could any clergyman perform it?"

His eyes behind the silver-rimmed glasses grew very thoughtful. "A great deal of evidence must be presented to prove that such an act should be performed. It is a very serious step. There are certain dangers involved."

She said clearly, "But exorcism is possible."

"In very rare instances, yes."

It could have been the very stillness that made Phyllis certain that Letty had heard and understood.

After Ben had left the following morning, Kate lingered at the table, slowly eating the last crumbs of a blueberry muffin. With her eyes still on the plate, she said to her mother, "What's exorcism?"

Phyllis's instant reaction was, "How did you happen to ask that?"

The child lifted her face. She went on in the same carefully controlled tone of voice, "If you exorcise somebody, does it hurt?"

Her mother stooped and held her close. "Of course not, darling. It's just a ceremony, a very

serious one that has to do with driving away . . . something harmful. Who told you . . . ”

Kate interrupted, looking directly into her eyes, “And they’d never come back? The person you make go away?”

Phyllis nodded. “We hope so.”

Kate was silent a moment and then she said matter-of-factly, “But you don’t have to worry about Letty any more. She’s already gone away.”

Without further explanation, Kate reached for another muffin and went into the living room to watch the nine o’clock cartoon show. Dumbfounded, Phyllis arose from beside the chair, and crossed the room to the doorway. For a time she stood there, watching Kate’s profile. But the child was absorbed in the program, nothing else.

A few days before school began, Mrs. Warren dropped by with a little girl. She called into the kitchen, “Anybody home? I brought somebody for you to meet.” She put an arm around both Kate and the other child. “This here’s Judy Davis. She’s the daughter of my new dairy-

man. I been telling her all about you, and how you’ll be taking the school bus together.”

The two children sized each other up, and then Kate said, “Want me to show you some of my dolls?”

That evening as Ben was helping her with the dishes, Phyllis glanced through the window to the grape arbor where Kate and her new friend were engrossed in coloring books. She handed Ben a plate. “Kate’s room is a shambles, but I couldn’t care less. They’ve had such a marvelous time all afternoon.”

Judy put down a crayon and blew a wisp of blonde hair away from her eyes. “Wasn’t this a good idea? I wish we’d thought of it sooner.”

Kate agreed, “Mm-mmm.”

The other child deliberated over a picture. Then she said, “I think I’ll color her breeches green, dark green.”

Kate popped her bubble gum in disgust. “Listen, if I can remember to call you Judy, you’d just better learn to say *slacks*. You want to get me in trouble again?”

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## Rich—or Dead

by David A. Heller

**C**lay Felton, twenty, American student tourist, clad in leather sandals, khaki shorts, and a dusty, sweat-stained brown sport shirt, walked the narrow Oude Zijds Voorburgwal of Amsterdam in discouragement. He had hoped to find in the Zeedijk district a cheap pension for the night, but the tourist season was in full swing in Amsterdam, and anything he could afford—certainly no more than eight guilders, about two dollars and a quarter—was filled. For nearly three months, Clay had knocked around Europe on a very inadequate budget, traveling in third class coaches, cycling, staying in youth hostels, sometimes sleeping in the haystack of an agreeable farmer. Still, his money had not stretched quite far enough. He had less than ten dollars in his pocket, with three and a half days before his ship, *Groot Vreeling*, the last student ship of the season, sailed from Amsterdam for New York. Yet it had been a good trip. Next year it was graduation from college, and then probably the army for him. Clay was glad he had been able to spend a summer in

Europe on what he had been able to scrape together.

Clay philosophically shrugged. Something would turn up. It always had. He was hungry, for he had not eaten since lunch, and then only coffee and two *broodies*, the small, open-faced sandwiches that are offered everywhere in Dutch cafes and food shops. He had decided to skip eating an evening meal to save money. By the most stringent economy, he would barely be able to hold out until his boat sailed for America.

Clay turned off the Oude Zijds Voorburgwal onto a dimly lighted side street. The narrow thoroughfare was dank with the dampness that comes late at night from Amsterdam's canals, and evil-smelling. Prices ought to be cheaper here. Perhaps he could find an upstairs place where he could afford to get a room for the evening. Otherwise, it would be sitting up all night in the railroad station for him. His luggage was checked at the railway station so he could search for a room unencumbered. Clay shrugged his broad shoulders and ran a hand through pale blond hair. In spite



CARY GRANT PAUSED BY THE DARKENED DOOR OF A CHEAP ROOMING HOUSE.

of his natural optimism, he was discouraged. The prospect of spending a night in any of the dives he had seen, even though he had been turned down because they were full, was not something to anticipate. Anything he might find would be worse.

Clay paused by the darkened door of a cheap rooming house. Abruptly, a hand suddenly grabbed his arm and pulled him inside. His first reaction was that he was being robbed, and he struggled free. Then he saw that the hand that had grabbed him belonged to a woman, a woman of the Zeedjik, dressed in a flimsy red kimono.

The woman hissed to him in English, "Do you want someone to see you? Come in. The police could be just around the corner."

If Clay had been thinking clearly he would have resisted, but he was startled, and his native Tennessee courtesy did not permit him to strike a woman. Before he quite realized what was happening, she had pulled him inside but paid no attention to him until she had locked the door. The window shade was drawn.

Then her manner abruptly changed. She turned to inspect him critically. "Your disguise is good, Eric. Very good. You do look like a down-at-the-heels American student traveler."

Clay fought back the involuntary smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Well, I do my best to look authentic," he said:

"You have done well. Klaas will be pleased. I shall tell him how good your disguise is. Wait, I will bring your package and your money." Then the woman in the red kimono vanished into another room.

Dazed, Clay sat down on the edge of the bed. Slowly, his mind began to work. It occurred to him that he had accidentally blundered into a dangerous situation. It was obviously a case of mistaken identity, and the terror at being observed by the police puzzled him. The police do not bother the women of the Zeedjik—or their customers. No, this must be something much more than that. Clay was sorely tempted to get out but, before he could escape, the woman returned.

Involuntarily, Clay found his eyes drawn to the young woman's face and body. She appeared to be about twenty-five, with a hard look, but different. She belonged to the underworld, but she was almost stunningly beautiful. Her air, the way she walked, spelled money, big money. She was redhaired, with finely-etched nose and chin, an elegant mouth, and unblem-

ished skin. Clay found himself staring at her, open-mouthed.

The woman read his thoughts and flushed slightly. Unconsciously, she drew the folds of the wispy red kimono more tightly around her.

"It was too dangerous to give you the delivery at the hotel," she said simply. "The hotel is being watched. I had to pretend to be a woman of the Zeedjik for this one night."

Clay Felton nodded. "Good idea."

"Here's your money. Count it, please, so there will be no question of a mistake. The rest you will receive when the delivery is made in America." She handed him a thick packet of Dutch currency.

Since she expected him to count the money, he did so. It amounted to five thousand Dutch guilders—about fourteen hundred dollars, American.

"Here's what you are to deliver. Just put it in your baggage, but be very careful with it, please."

To Clay's astonishment, she handed him a pair of souvenir Dutch wooden shoes. He turned them toward the light. The wooden shoes were varnished, with decals of garlands of brightly-colored tulips, and a Dutch boy and girl holding hands. In English, each shoe carried the legend *Amsterdam*,

*Venice of the North*. Both wooden shoes were filled with Dutch chocolates wrapped in gold foil. The shoes were tied together and covered with cellophane. Similar chocolate-filled wooden shoes were on sale at every souvenir shop in Amsterdam for about two dollars a pair. Clay wondered what this special pair contained—heroin or diamonds?

"Clever. Shouldn't attract any attention at Customs."

"They won't. There is no risk for you."

I'll bet, Clay thought, but he said nothing.

"You'd better leave quickly. I'll show you out the back way."

Clay gazed speculatively at the scantily-clad woman. She was very attractive.

"Hurry!" she urged him. "Every minute you are here, there is danger. You could be killed."

Clay did not reply. He thrust a hand into the pocket of his khaki shorts, drew out a package of cigarettes, and offered her one, which was nervously refused. Then he lit a cigarette for himself. He gazed at her speculatively.

"Pity. Such an exotic place, such a beautiful woman. One should take advantage of life's opportunities, don't you think?"

The attractive, redhaired woman flushed and drew the red

kimono tighter around herself. However, to Clay, she did not seem especially displeased. It had been his experience that women are more apt to be displeased with the man who does not make a pass at them than with the one who does.

"Don't be a fool, Eric. Your boat leaves in two hours."

"I'll make the boat in plenty of time." He wondered which boat it was that left in two hours. He seized her by the waist.

"No! Please don't! Klaas would kill you—and me—if he dreamed you laid a finger on me." The girl's eyes were blue and very wide open. She spoke with genuine terror, her voice rising to a squeal.

Clay wondered who Klaas was, but he smiled knowingly. "You can't very well put up much of a fuss then, can you? And then there's the police. You wouldn't want to attract their attention, would you?"

Without waiting for her to answer, Clay drew her toward him, but she turned away. Perhaps she feared that every moment was dangerous and only wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible. On the other hand, it might have been masculine vanity but he felt that she did not object nearly as much as she pretended. Her blue eyes were shining, and Clay imagined she

was not at all displeased to think herself femininely irresistible. Nevertheless, she led him up a crumbling back stairway and let him out into the black, deserted street.

Clay turned toward the railroad station, but had gone only three blocks when he came upon a crowd of people clustered about the Zeedjik Canal. Searchlights from police boats stabbed fingers of white light through the black night. They were dragging the canal for something. Lost in the crowd, he waited. A few minutes later, the grappling hooks pulled the body of a man to the surface. Heavy weights were tied to a metal chain looped about the bare knees. Foul, oozing mud covered the face and eyes. A gasp of horror swept the crowd. The corpse's throat had been hideously slashed so that the head was barely attached. Clay Felton noticed something else. The corpse had light blond hair, wore khaki shorts, leather sandals, and a sport shirt, and looked like an American college student.

His first impulse was to hide. It might be dangerous even to walk the few blocks to the railroad station. Instinctively, he headed into the darkness toward a bridge. In Europe, the poorest of the poor sleep under bridges—and they are seldom bothered. Running into the

darkness, he found a deserted area, and then clambered under the supports of one of the innumerable bridges that dot Amsterdam.

Presently, for he had not eaten and was famished, he tore the cellophane from one of the wooden shoes filled with chocolates. Biting into the candy carefully, he cracked the chocolate off, and a sparkling, gleaming diamond was in his hand. In the two wooden shoes there were twenty-four diamonds.

Clay Felton sat hunched up in the musty dampness under the bridge and did the hardest thinking of his life. The idea of being a thief had never seriously occurred to him before. Now, however, he was in possession of a fortune. The gleaming diamonds, which he carefully placed in his money belt, made him feel like a walking branch of Tiffany's. If he could get the diamonds safely into the United States, he would be rich. If he could not, he was dead. It was that simple. The murder of the man dragged out of the canal was proof that diamond smuggling was a deadly business. Not only the smuggling ring but also the police would be combing Amsterdam for the murderer.

Clay had no way to prove his innocence. No alibi. He did not know a soul in Amsterdam. No

one could vouch for his whereabouts at the probable time of the murder.

What was worse, the smugglers could realize their mistake.

So it all boiled down to a place to hide.

Where *could* he hide? Hole up in a cheap hotel for three days? No. Cheap hotels would be the first place they would look. Gradually, the outline of a bold plan formed in Clay's mind. Thinking hard, he went over it and over it and over it again in his mind. Then, bone-weary, he was gradually overcome by sleep. There was nothing he could do until morning anyway, and he needed the rest.

The noises of Amsterdam's early morning traffic awakened him, but Clay did not venture out from his cranny underneath the bridge until swarms of people were on the street, hurrying to work. Then he felt it safe to melt into the rushing throng. His first step was to take a tram to the railway station. Then he bought a Dutch newspaper, glanced at it, saw that a picture of the murdered man was on the front page. He wanted to read the story but could not make out the language. Anyway, he was in a hurry, with more important things to do.

Clay reclaimed his baggage from the luggage room, went

into the men's room, washed quickly, and ran a comb through his disheveled hair. Then he went into a pay lavatory, took his wrinkled blue suit from the valise, and put it on. Wrapping his faded khaki shorts, sport shirt, and sandals in the Dutch newspaper, he waited until nobody was looking, then dumped the bundle into a trash container. Examining himself in the mirror, he was partially satisfied. Then he rechecked his luggage.

The next step was to find a barber. Explaining that he wanted a shave was easy, but trying to get the idea across to a Dutch barber that he wanted an unfamiliar crew haircut was harder. Somehow he managed. Next, Clay walked down the Damrak until he found an optical shop. The clerk spoke English, so it was not difficult to explain that he had lost his glasses and needed a pair to replace them for reading. No, he was sorry he did not remember the prescription. Clay glanced at some eye charts, and the clerk gave him a ~~weak~~ prescription that magnified objects only slightly. After selecting a dark, horn-rimmed frame for his glasses, Clay looked at himself in the mirror and was satisfied that a dramatic change had been made in his appearance. He paid for the glasses with one of the

bills the redhaired girl had given him. There was much change. One thing he did not have to worry about now was money.

The next stop was a famous men's clothing store on Dam Square where he selected a conservative outfit and emerged from the changing rooms wearing his new apparel. As an afterthought, he bought a hat to cover his light blond hair.

Clay hailed a cab and went next to the V.V.V., Amsterdam's official tourist organization, where he requested a room at the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky. His luck was good. The clerk was able to get him a reservation, so Clay went across the street to the railroad station, reclaimed his checked luggage, and was registered in the Krasnapolsky fifteen minutes later.

Next came a hot, soaking bath. Then he called room service and ordered breakfast: ham and eggs, toast, a jar of good Dutch jam, and a pot of black coffee. Stretched luxuriously on a soft, clean bed, Clay decided that if he might die, he was going to live first class while he could. After eating, he fell into an exhausted sleep.

Waking, he ventured into the lobby of the hotel, bought the Paris edition of a New York paper, then went into the dining room and ordered lunch. While

waiting for his steak, Clay leafed through the pages of the newspaper. On page four he found what he was looking for:

#### AMERICAN SLAIN IN AMSTERDAM

*The mysterious slaying of a young American, Eric Phelan, 23, has created a sensation in Amsterdam. An anonymous tip yesterday led police to drag an indicated section of the Zeedijk Canal. Phelan's weighted body, the throat cut, with knife wounds apparently indicating torture before death, was recovered last night.*

*Rumors, on which the police refuse to comment, connected Phelan with diamond smuggling operations between the Netherlands and the United States. Last week U.S. Customs officials closely questioned Phelan about his activities, but there was no arrest for lack of evidence. Unofficially, Phelan's death is believed to have been caused by a rival smuggling gang . . .*

Since there are swarms of tourists in Amsterdam at all seasons of the year, Clay decided that his best disguise was to hide out in plain sight—taking on the protective coloration of the sightseeing tourist. He bought a guidebook and system-

atically pursued the tourist sights of the city: the magnificent Rijksmuseum, with its many Rembrandts, the Stedelijk Museum, which has hundreds of Van Gogh canvases, the Rembrandthuis, the home of Rembrandt, the tropical plant museum. For three days, Clay haunted museums and art galleries, and nobody paid the slightest attention to him.

The *Groot Vreeling*, upon which Clay Felton was to return to the United States from Amsterdam, has a reputation as a "student ship." Those who have sailed it describe it as a kind of floating madhouse. It has few comforts. Commercial and well-heeled passengers seldom travel it. Its appeal is economy, the cheapest way to get between Europe and America. Most of its space is booked months in advance. The cabins are packed with seven hundred college students, three or four to a tiny cabin, though a few higher-priced staterooms often go begging. Clay considered getting a stateroom or changing his reservation to fly back, but decided to do nothing that might attract attention to himself, like canceling one reservation and trying to get another.

He checked out of the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky and arrived at the pier by taxi. An enormous mob of students milled about,

but he saw nothing suspicious. For a brief moment he was exultant. He had made it. Then, as he walked down the pier, his heart sank. Far down, the red-haired woman was standing beside the embarkation gangplank. Beside her stood an enormous fat man in a dark suit and two tall, muscular men who had gangster written all over them.

Clay was panicstricken. Had they found out about him? It was logical that they should check the ship, since the *Groot Vreeling* was the last student ship sailing for the season. The original scheme was to have a smuggler, disguised as a student, take the diamonds across. The diamonds had been given to someone who resembled a student. Perhaps they were checking students to see if any carried a pair of souvenir wooden shoes filled with chocolates.

Clay tipped a porter to have his baggage taken aboard. Then he turned and walked half a block to a souvenir shop.

"Do you speak English here?"

"Yes."

"Do you have fifty of these?" He pointed to a pair of the wooden shoes filled with chocolates.

"Fifty, sir?" The souvenir man was astonished.

"Yes. I'm doing some public relations work for the New York

office of the *Groot Vreeling*. If I buy fifty of these, can you have someone stand out front and give them away? But only give them to young men students who can show a ticket for this sailing of the *Groot Vreeling*. A separate gift will be given on board to the young ladies." Clay pulled out several large bills.

"I'm sure it can be arranged, sir."

"Very well. Give me a receipt for my office, please." Clay thought that sounded business-like. "And remember, say, 'Compliments of the *Groot Vreeling*', each time you give one away. And give them only to young men students who can show you their tickets."

"You can depend on it, sir."

"This is an experiment. If it builds good will for the line, you may get other business in the future."

Clay paid over three hundred seventy-five Dutch guilders, got his receipt, walked a few steps to an outdoor cafe and ordered coffee, then watched as the fifty sets of chocolate-filled wooden shoes were quickly dispensed.

He chuckled as he thought of the watching four going slightly crazy trying to check all those pairs of souvenir shoes. Then he got in line and calmly walked aboard. The redhaired woman, the fat man, the two mobsters did not give him more than a

passing glance. Wearing a hat, bespectacled, well-dressed, he hardly resembled at all the poor student to whom the diamonds had been given.

Clay's cabin was on C deck, deep in the bowels of the ship. It bore no relation to the luxury in which he had been living. Two other college-age students were already in the cramped space.

"Hi, I'm Tony McKenzie, Toledo, Ohio." A handsome, dark-haired extrovert grinned at him.

"I'm Clay Felton, Nashville, Tennessee."

"This is Howard Braden. He's from Chicago."

They shook hands all around.

Tony, it quickly developed, was a smooth operator with the girls. He looked Clay over appraisingly, decided he did not have two heads and was socially acceptable.

"How about going up to the bar for a beer?"

"Okay," Clay agreed.

As they were walking up the passageway to the Main deck, Tony grew confidential. "Clay, I've been circulating around. Making contacts."

"Oh?"

"The best the *Groot Vreeling* has to offer this trip are a couple of belles from Louisville. I've made a date for us to meet them in the bar." Then he added, "Howard's okay, but he's not the

type any pretty girl is going to flip over, and we've got to move in fast."

Clay laughed, expecting that he had been made the goat to escort a dog while Tony latched onto the dear, but when he met Janet Neal and Anne Gardner he changed his mind. Janet, a dramatic brunette, and Tony had already begun what was to be a torrid shipboard romance. Anne Gardner was a vivacious honey blonde, and had green eyes. Somewhat to Clay's surprise, she was also intelligent. Anne seemed embarrassed at falling into the blind date category, but he quickly found himself liking her very much.

Then he glanced up and received a terrifying shock. The redhaired woman from the Zeedjik, her fat, sinister companion, and the two darksuited musclemen were on board as passengers, probably in one of the expensive staterooms which the students couldn't afford. They walked slowly through the bar, looking people over, glancing from side to side.

The days quickly fell into a pattern, with sunning, swimming, eating, dancing, drinking beer, and at night making whatever amorous arrangements the cramped, crowded quarters of the ship permitted.

Clay permitted Tony and Janet to throw him and Anne to-

gether. It would not do to be too much the lone wolf, to behave in any way suspiciously. He took Anne swimming and dancing, played shuffleboard with her, flirted with her, kissed her casually on the moonlit deck, flattered her in an offhand, absentminded way. What he was really thinking about—night and day—was the voluptuous redhead and her companions and, above all, how to stay out of their way.

They were thorough and methodical, those four, circulating, scrutinizing everybody, eliminating the possibilities. The red-haired woman was their bird dog. She had a disconcerting way of moving quietly into circles of people and listening to conversation, straining to recognize a certain voice she had heard in the Zeedjik.

Clay was evasive and managed to stay out of their way, but surreptitiously, he kept following the spectacular figure in tight green stretch pants. His wandering eyes did not escape Anne's alert notice.

"Who's the redhead?" Clay arched an eyebrow toward the girl he had unexpectedly met that fateful night in the Zeedjik. Anne knew everybody on board. She made it her business to know. She was that kind of girl.

"She's French. Her name is

Francoise Bourdon. You seem to find her quite fascinating."

"Who's the fat guy with her?"

"He's her *uncle*," Tony McKenzie broke in, with a meaningful smirk. "His name is De Jongh, and they say he's loaded; in the diamond business."

"Everybody who believes he's really her uncle go stand in the corner on his pointed head." Anne was jealous of Clay's sudden interest in the French-woman. "I suppose she's pretty—if you like the hard type."

Clay grinned. "I prefer honey blondes with green eyes myself." Then he added, "Soft and cuddly."

"You're maddening, Clay."

"Why?"

"You keep saying things like that to me—and then you never do anything about it."

It took Francoise Bourdon and De Jongh exactly five days, fourteen hours, and thirty-five minutes to find him out. There was a bull session around the postage-stamp-sized swimming pool. Clay was flirting in an absentminded way with Anne Gardner, and they were all talking and laughing. He had not even noticed Francoise, in her sexy scarlet bikini, standing behind him, carefully listening.

Then he turned suddenly and, looking straight into Francoise's blue eyes, realized at once that she recognized him.

After that, it was just a matter of time before Francoise skillfully maneuvered him alone. He was standing by the railing when she quietly moved beside him. "Hello, Mr. Felton."

Startled, Clay turned to see the redhaired Francoise smiling pleasantly at him. "Remember me?"

Clay recovered as quickly as he could. "Of course—from the pool."

The scarlet mouth continued smiling. "And also from the Zeedjik, Mr. Felton. You told me—what were your words? —that I was beautiful. How unflattering to be forgotten so soon."

Clay was too startled to deny it. Besides, denials were obviously useless.

Francoise was gay and cheery about giving him the bad news. "There is little time to waste in idle conversation, *chéri*. I remember your voice quite well. I must compliment you. You have—how do you say it?—a bedroom voice."

"What happens next, Francoise?"

"Ah, you have taken the trouble to learn my name! How gallant."

"I remember you very well, of course."

Clay saw a flicker of interest flash across her eyes. It would do no harm to flatter her a little. He was in a very tough spot.

Abruptly, Francoise's manner changed to great seriousness. "What a charming boy! How sad that you must soon die, unless you are very clever and do exactly what Klaas asks you to do. You must realize that you are in grave danger. You have put us to a very great deal of trouble." There was no hint of the former light mockery.

Speculatively, Francoise's blue eyes gazed at him, almost with affection. "You are lucky, *chéri*, very lucky. More lucky than any man I have ever known."

Clay shrugged. He didn't feel lucky. "Why?"

She turned light and gay again. "First, because, quite by accident, you happen to remind me of a sweet boy I once loved. That was very long ago, before many things happened." For the briefest of moments a shadow of unutterable sadness flickered over Francoise Bourdon's face. "Because of that, I have interceded with Klaas on your behalf. Second, and more important, you are now in a position to be useful to Klaas. But do not push your luck too far. Klaas is in the bar. He wishes to speak with you. Agree to do exactly what he says if you wish to live."

Francoise slipped her arm through his. They walked into the bar, smiling and chatting like old friends. Anne Gardner

saw them and turned her face away.

Klaas De Jongh rose to greet him. They shook hands quite cordially. Clay saw the fat underworld figure eyeing him with interest. The two darksuited strongmen were also sitting at the table. De Jongh ordered a round of martinis, and then got right to the point.

"The diamonds, Mr. Felton. I want them back. Most ingenious of you to have murdered the late Mr. Eric Phelan and taken his place. But, of course, you can't possibly get away with it. I have business associates in New York. I assure you, you won't live a day after we reach port—unless you wish to come to an arrangement with me."

Klaas De Jongh purred the words in a soft, barely audible whisper. The menace was the more terrifying for its matter-of-fact tone.

Clay shook his head. "I didn't murder Phelan. That was somebody else."

De Jongh mopped his fat face with a fine linen handkerchief, and smiled through yellowed teeth. "Perhaps so. I have business rivals."

"I didn't do it."

Klaas raised a fat hand. "It's immaterial—to everyone except poor Eric, of course. And to the police. What is important now is that I had a business arrange-

ment with Eric. I should like to persuade you to carry it out."

"What was the arrangement?"

"Ten thousand American dollars, Mr. Felton. Simply take the stones through Customs, then turn them over to me. You will receive ten thousand dollars in cash."

Clay Felton felt flushed and his pulse pounded. "No. That's not very generous, Mr. De Jongh. The diamonds must be worth half a million."

De Jongh smiled. "Let's not quibble over price, Mr. Felton. Make it twenty thousand."

Clay took a deep breath, then gulped down the rest of his martini. "Mr. De Jongh, you've got yourself a deal."

"Splendid." The fat man beamed expansively. Clay imagined that he could have asked for more and gotten it.

"One thing, Mr. De Jongh. Let's not do anything foolish like having me thrown overboard tonight, huh? The diamonds are hidden—and you still need me to get them through Customs for you—unless you want to do that little job yourself."

De Jongh feigned shocked indignation. "Mr. Felton! I am a man of honor!"

"Sure." Clay tried not to make his voice sound too dry. "Well, thanks for the drink. See you tomorrow at Customs." Clay rose

and walked out on deck. For a long time, he gazed at the blue, dancing waves, cut against the ship's side by the white foam of the vessel's wake.

It was all a stall to buy time, to live perhaps one more night. Whatever happened, his future looked grim. Clay did not for a moment believe that De Jongh would actually pay over twenty thousand dollars for smuggling in the diamonds. Really, it was as cheap for De Jongh to promise him twenty thousand dollars as ten thousand. Once past Customs, Clay could look forward to the same fate as Eric Phelan. An attempted theft of a half million dollars' worth of gem diamonds would not be forgiven by an international smuggling ring as rich and well organized as De Jongh's. Also, he knew too much for the gang to permit him to live.

What next? He pondered deeply as he watched the rolling blue Atlantic. His first impulse was to panic, to hide. He could skip dinner, stay away from his cabin, perhaps hide somewhere

the engine room, or in a life-boat (he quickly discarded that idea), or some deserted part of the ship, then make a break for it early tomorrow morning.

The problem was that a ship is a cramped, jampacked floating city in which there aren't any unused spaces. If he tried to

sneak into the engine room he'd be as conspicuous as a two-headed calf to the crew, and to hide in some obvious place, like under the canvas of a lifeboat, would be to invite death. De Jongh and his men would be sure to be watching him. If he disappeared, or acted suspiciously, they would come looking. If they ever caught him alone, it would be easy enough for De Jongh's strongarm boys to work him over quietly, get out of him where the diamonds were, take them, and then pitch him over the side in the dark of night.

The only safe thing, Clay decided, was to stay in the middle of crowds of people, away from possible lonely passageways or deserted decks. He walked back into the bar and was relieved to see that it was filled with people. Glancing around, he saw Tony McKenzie, Anne and Janet Neal, and a circle of other students surrounding them.

"Hi, may I join you?"

"Sure. Draw up a chair."

Clay pulled up a chair beside Anne. The talk turned to the captain's farewell party that night, then to the war in Vietnam, the draft, the Peace Corps, and modern art, the usual things. Anne was enthusiastic about the Peace Corps and planned to join it for two years after graduation from college. A friend of

hers had signed up, been sent to Nigeria, and had had many adventures which Anne described as "fabulous."

"Clay! You're not half listening to me!" Anne smiled at him. "Your mind is a million miles away."

"Sorry."

"I've been talking too much."

"No. I like to hear you talk. I was just thinking that a pretty girl like you would be wasted in Nigeria."

She was pleased with the compliment, and he forced his mind to focus on the conversation. If his preoccupation was all that evident, that was bad. He had to act and appear as natural as possible.

Somebody suggested a swim in the pool, but the girls had had their hair fixed for the captain's party and didn't want to get it wet.

"Why don't we have a shuffleboard tournament?" Anne asked.

It was agreed that everybody would put a dollar in the pot, with the winning team taking all. Clay was pleased with the suggestion. That would keep a crowd together for at least a couple of hours. Then it would be time to go down and dress for dinner. It would be a dirty trick to play on Tony, who would be anxious to get Janet into as many dark corners as possible

tonight, but it was his intention to stick to them like glue.

Anne and he played well in shuffleboard and reached the semifinals. Then, as if struck by inspiration, he turned to her: "Tony and Janet are going to the Captain's Ball tonight. Why don't we go with them and double date?"

Anne smiled and said softly, "At last! I thought you'd never ask me."

"I thought you knew I would."

The decks were crowded with people taking the late afternoon sun, and Clay judged it was sage to invite Anne to go for a shipboard stroll with him. They passed De Jongh's two dark-suited men. Involuntarily, Clay flinched. He was honestly scared to death, but tried not to show it.

"Clay, there's something mysterious about you. What's the matter?"

Startled, for he had almost forgotten Anne was with him, he turned and really looked at her for the first time. Her eyes were full of genuine concern for him. Touched, he suddenly took her in his arms and kissed her.

"You're in trouble, Clay. Can I help you?"

"No."

"You don't have a wife stashed away someplace—or a girl you're engaged to?"

The unexpected question

struck Clay's tortured nerves as hilariously funny. It was, of course, the first question a girl would want to know about a young man in whom she was interested, but the question touched off in him an uncontrollable impulse to laugh.

Anne bristled. "It's not so funny, Clay. Tell me how I can help you."

Again, Clay was touched. "I can't, Anne. I'm in trouble, but not that kind." Instantly, he regretted the slip, but he was amused by her obvious relief that his problem was not a wife or a fiancée.

"I'll help you in any way I can. I won't ask any questions."

He should not have yielded, but he was near the breaking point. "If you *really* want to help . . ."

"I do."

"Let's go to the ship's library then." Clay led her to the library and writing room, saw that it was deserted, paused only long enough to get an envelope and several sheets of writing paper, and then led her to a bar half filled with people.

"You have a drink while I write a letter."

Clay addressed the envelope to the Commissioner of Customs, Washington, D.C., and in the letter told the entire story. Then he sealed the letter and handed it to Anne.

"If anything happens tomorrow—you'll know if it does—mail this right away in New York. Don't read it. It would be dangerous for you to know what's in it. If nothing happens, I'll get the letter back from you, tear it up, and we'll celebrate by painting the town. Okay?"

"But Clay—"

"You said no questions."

"No questions." Anne put the letter in her purse.

Then Clay suddenly looked around him. He had been so intent on what he was writing that he had forgotten about De Jongh and the two musclemen. They were watching and glaring daggers at him. Unquestionably, they had a good idea what was in that letter, and to whom it might be addressed.

"Anne, give me back the letter."

Anne Gardner thoughtfully glanced at De Jongh and the two hoodlums, then said, "No, I won't."

"Anne—those men. They've got to see you give me back the letter. You're in serious trouble unless you do. You have no idea how much trouble."

"I can imagine, Clay. But I'm keeping the letter anyway. If anything happens, I'll mail it tomorrow in New York. If nothing does, I'll give it back to you." Anne defiantly stared De Jongh full in the eye—until the fat

man dropped his gaze—then said, "It's a kind of insurance for you, isn't it, Clay? If they think I may mail the letter if anything happens to you, it's less likely that something *will* happen, isn't it?"

"At the cost of making it *more* likely that something will happen to you. Give me back the letter."

She would not return the letter and that was that, but people had now begun to stare. Clay grabbed Anne's arm and led her quickly down to the swimming pool, where a group of sunbathers were clustered around. De Jongh and the two men followed.

It was the last day of the trip and several couples, dreading the ending of shipboard romances, were ardently kissing. Clay led Anne to a couple of vacant deck chairs, put his arms around her, and kissed her. Then he whispered in her ear.

"Anne, when the next group of people moves toward the front of the ship, I'm going to walk you to your cabin. Bolt the door and don't let anybody in, not even your roommates. Make them bring the steward to get in. Tonight we've got to stay in crowds of people. We have to have people around us all the time. All the time. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And, darling, I'm sorry, so

sorry, that I've got you involved in this."

"I'm not," Anne said, and gave him a kiss that was full of promise.

That evening was a game of hunter and hunted. They dawdled through dinner, went early to the Captain's Ball, and stayed late. All evening long, De Jongh and his hoodlums seemed right at their elbow. Clay could not read De Jongh's mind, but it occurred to him that De Jongh must have just about made up his mind to commit murder and take his chances with Customs. He was a fool if he hadn't, and De Jongh did not impress him as a fool.

Finally, the ship's orchestra played the last note of music. The ball was over. Soon the crowd would be breaking up. What then? The moment Clay Felton had dreaded was approaching. Watching De Jongh from across the room, he fancied he saw a catlike look of anticipation on the fat man's face.

Then Anne said unexpectedly in a lilting voice, "Surprise, everybody!" The gay banter hushed. Anne stood up. "Since this is the last night aboard ship, and a lot of us who have grown fond of each other might not see each other for long time . . ."

A chorus of groans greeted this dismal prospect.

"Some of us girls thought it would be silly to waste the last night sleeping, so we've arranged a deck party . . ."

Cheers.

"The stewards have set up a lot of chairs on the fantail. We thought we'd spend the last night watching the full moon . . ."

Wild cheers.

"We won't go to bed at all. We'll just stay on deck until we dock tomorrow . . ."

Pandemonium.

Anne and Clay led the parade back to the fantail. Perhaps two hundred deck chairs and robes were waiting.

Overwhelmed, Clay turned to Anne admiringly. "You're a pretty clever girl."

Anne smiled brightly. "Oh, you don't know half of how clever I am, darling. I can cook and I can sew and do all the things that well brought up young ladies are supposed to be able to do."

She led him to two deck chairs in the center. As they kissed, she whispered, "I don't think those men would commit murder in front of two hundred witnesses, do you?"

"No. It isn't likely."

"Let's forget all about them then, darling."

The long night that Clay had dreaded turned out to be memorable—but in a way he had not expected. As Anne slyly pointed

out to him, a good woman can smooth a man's path in unexpected ways.

The *Groot Vreeling* docked at dawn. Plans had been made for Clay to be the first person off the ship. Perhaps he could get the jump on De Jongh and his men. He could get off the boat, pass Customs, disappear quickly, call Anne at her hotel later.

But after a night of romance, Clay found this was the bleak morning after. De Jongh and his men had anticipated him. They were waiting to disembark, too. He was trapped. In the struggling swirl of humanity getting off the boat, Clay found himself next to De Jongh and his musclemen all the way. They surrounded him. He handed in his landing card, showed his passport to Immigration, and displayed his yellow vaccination card to the Public Health Service man. Then Clay found himself at the head of the line for Customs inspection.

The Customs man, garbed in white shirt and dark tie, smiled pleasantly. "Welcome home. Have you got your luggage ready for inspection?"

Clay smiled weakly. Once past this line, he could be either rich—or dead. "No. I haven't any luggage. I left it aboard ship."

The Customs inspector's smile faded to a puzzled frown. "Aren't

you going to bring your luggage into the United States? It must pass inspection if you are."

"No." Clay shook his head.

"Do you have anything to declare, then?"

"Nothing," said Clay, "except a small bag full of diamonds."

The Customs inspector stared at him as if he were a lunatic. Then Clay reached into his pocket, took out the bag, and poured the glittering stones into the astonished inspector's hands.

"These aren't mine. They're the property of that gentleman," Clay pointed to Klaas De Jongh standing in the next line, "over there."

The inspector glanced at the glittering diamonds, then motioned excitedly to a policeman. "Hold that man!" He pointed to Klaas.

The fat man panicked and be-

gan to run. He didn't even reach the end of the pier before he was caught, and Francoise and the two musclemen were subsequently arrested.

There were many questions. It was hours before they released Clay Felton. But there was one item of good news. He had not known that there is a reward for information leading to the arrest of smugglers and the confiscation of valuable property that one attempts to smuggle into the United States. Up to twenty-five percent of the market value of the contraband merchandise, to a maximum reward of fifty thousand dollars, was what the man said. At any rate, it ought to be a tidy sum.

Clay quickly ducked into a phone booth to call Anne. It was time to start planning that celebration.

# Finger Man

by Jack Ritchie

**H**e said that I could call him Fred.

Now, as I drove through the flat desert country, we listened to the local newscaster announce:

"Hannibal Coggins, mass murderer of the 1960's, escaped from the state prison farm early this afternoon. He disappeared shortly after the noon roll call. Coggins is considered to be extremely dangerous."

I turned down the volume of the car radio slightly. "They didn't give a description of Coggins."

Fred nodded. "I suppose because it might do more harm than good. People would get all excited and turn in dozens of innocent citizens. It's probably enough that the police know what he looks like."

"I remember the case," I said. "Coggins went on a shooting spree and killed eleven people."

"Twelve," Fred said. "One afternoon he got into an argument with his neighbor about a property line and in due course he shot him. Then, feeling that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, he strolled about the neighborhood shoot-

ing people he disliked. He got twelve, including a dentist and a used-car salesman."

"Obviously he wasn't hanged."

"No. The governor at that time apparently had strong feelings about capital punishment. He commuted the sentence."

The radio began playing country western music.

"How far is it to the nearest gas station?" Fred asked.

I glanced at the map on the seat beside me. "About five miles more to Everettville. Where did you say you ran out of gas? I didn't see your car."

"It happened on one of those little side roads. Had to walk more than two miles before I got to the highway."

When I picked up Fred, he had been standing at the side of the road carrying a two gallon gasoline can and waving an entreating thumb. Ordinarily I might have passed him by, but he wore a business suit and in this desert country where the traffic is sparse one hesitates to pass people in distress miles and miles from the nearest habitation.

"What line of work are you in?" I asked.

"Haberdashery," Fred said. Then he smiled faintly. "But that's getting to be an old fashioned word. I own a men's clothing store back in Santa Fe. Was driving west to visit my daughter when I ran out of gas."

I glanced at Fred. His suit seemed to be of a good quality, but I couldn't admire the tailoring of the jacket. The back of the collar gaped away from the neck.

Fred patted his armrest. "Nice car. Chevy, isn't it?"

I nodded and then corrected myself. "No. A Ford. My last car was a Chevy. I keep getting the two mixed up."

Far ahead of us, a small cluster of houses came into view. They grew bigger as we approached, and finally we passed a sign that read EVERETTVILLE, POP. 278.

Half a dozen cars were parked in front of what appeared to be the town's only cafe.

I glanced at my watch. "Nearly six. Frankly, I could use a bite to eat."

Fred nodded quickly. "Sounds like a pretty good idea to me."

I pulled into the parking area, and Fred and I entered the cafe.

It seemed to be fairly well filled with patrons. The three booths were all occupied and only two stools, side by side,

appeared to be open at the counter.

A law officer, apparently a sheriff, sat at the far end of the counter eating his supper. He was a somewhat paunchy middle-aged man wearing sunglasses. He also came equipped with a wide-brimmed white hat and a service revolver on a belt generously studded with cartridges.

Fred and I took the two vacant stools and studied the typewritten menu cards.

Fred looked up at the wall clock. "Excuse me, I think I'd better phone my daughter and explain why I'll be late. Save my stool." He went to the phone booth at the end of the room.

His back was turned toward me, but as I watched him I thought I saw him writing something on the margin of the telephone book.

I studied him for another few seconds and then pulled a paper napkin from its holder. Using my ballpoint pen, I wrote:

*Hannibal Coggins, the escaped killer, is sitting next to me at this counter. He is dangerous and probably armed and will not hesitate to kill.*

I folded the napkin into a tight wad and rose. I walked past the telephone booth to the

jukebox, ostensibly to study the list of records.

Almost at my elbow, the sheriff transported a forkful of mashed potatoes to his mouth.

I glanced at the phone booth again. Fred seemed to be still busy, but was he somehow watching me?

As unobtrusively as possible, I flipped the wadded napkin over the sheriff's shoulder. It bounced off the catsup bottle and came to rest in his saucer of peas.

I strode firmly back to my stool and picked up the menu.

Fred joined me in less than a minute. "Anything look good enough to eat?"

The sheriff appeared behind us. He tapped the shoulder of a burly individual on my right. "Are you Hannibal Coggins?"

"Not him," I whispered fiercely. "On my *other* side." I pointed to Fred.

Fred, in turn, pointed a finger at me. "Careful, sheriff, he's probably armed."

The sheriff's eyes went over both of us. Then he produced the note I'd written and read it aloud.

Fred's mouth gaped slightly.

The sheriff next read from a scrap of paper which had evidently been torn from a telephone book:

*The man on the stool to my*

*right is Hannibal Coggins, who escaped from the state prison farm today. He's a mass killer and extremely dangerous.*

I smiled tightly. "Quick thinking, Fred, but *my* note takes precedence."

Fred reached for his back pocket, but stopped when the sheriff's hand went to the butt of his gun.

"My name is Fred Stevens," Fred said stiffly. "I'm from Santa Fe. I've got *full* identification."

"Of course," I said dryly. "And out there in the desert lies the body of a man without a wallet or a suit of clothes." I indicated Fred's collar. "Would a man who claims he owns a haberdashery wear a suit that bulges so badly at the collar? It's little things like that which trip up the criminal."

Fred's voice rose. "I've got square shoulders and it's pretty hard to find a ready-made suit that fits square shoulders." He turned on me. "And what about *you*? You were driving a Ford, but you thought it was a Chevy until you took another look at the nameplate. Speaking of bodies in the desert, there's probably somebody lying out there who used to own a Ford."

The sheriff studied us and then rubbed his jaw. "I don't have any mug shots of Hanni-

bal Coggins yet. The state police will probably get around to sending me some in a couple of days."

Fred blinked. "But surely you must have a *description* of Hannibal Coggins?"

"Well, yes. But it's pretty general and could fit either one of you, or half a dozen people in town. Suppose I just put *both* of you behind bars until I find out which one is the real Hannibal Coggins?"

Fred protested. "On what specific charge do you think you could arrest *both* of us?"

"Litterbugging," the sheriff said. "You two been throwing wads of paper around, and that can play hob with the ecology." He put a hand on the butt of his revolver again. "Now stand up and turn around."

We did as we were told.

He found no weapons.

"Fine," he said. "Turn around and march out the door. The jail is right next to Harry's Bar." It was a short, though dusty, thirty-second walk to the adobe jailhouse. Inside, it was nicely cool. The small building consisted only of an area for the sheriff's desk and filing cabinet and two unoccupied cells.

The sheriff put one of us in each of the cells.

"What do you intend to do now?" Fred demanded. "Wait for the mail?"

"No," the sheriff said. "The simplest thing to do is for me to drive up to Phoenix and have a look at Hannibal Coggins' picture." He picked up the phone, dialed, and got somebody named Jim. He told Jim to come over to the jailhouse.

Jim appeared within ten minutes. He was a thin man in his middle twenties, thoroughly Adam's-appled, and with the usual suntan that ended abruptly at the hatline.

"My deputy," the sheriff explained. He handed Jim a badge and then turned back to us. "I'd like to take your fingerprints along to Phoenix."

Fred and I both protested, but our prints were taken.

After the sheriff left for Phoenix, Jim sat down at the desk and picked up a true detective magazine. He turned through it, found something interesting, and began reading, his lips moving slowly.

Fred went to the bars of his cell. "How long will it take the sheriff to get to Phoenix?"

"Two hours there and two hours back," Jim said.

Fred watched him read for a while. "So you're the deputy?"

Jim nodded. "Part-time—whenever I'm needed. Otherwise I work at Bud's Garage."

"How much does deputizing pay?"

"Three fifteen an hour. And

when I get in six months' time —that's nine hundred and sixty hours—I become eligible for health insurance."

"How many hours do you have in now?"

"Exactly six hundred twenty-three. Took me five years of part-time to accumulate that."

Fred reached for his wallet and pulled out a number of bills. "There's five hundred dollars in this roll." He folded the bills and tossed them out of his cell. "Well, well, deputy, look what dropped out of your pocket."

Jim frowned and shook his head. "No, sirree. We'll have none of that hanky-panky while I'm on duty."

He got a broom and pushed the money back to the cell bars. "It might be more polite to hand it back to you personally, but we're not supposed to even touch the prisoners' money."

I lay down on my bunk. After a while I groaned slightly.

The deputy looked my way. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I have a terrible pain in my side," I said. I groaned again.

The deputy scratched his ear. "If it's appendicitis, there's nothing much I can do except phone the doctor. Only we don't have any here in town. I'd have to get Red Rock."

"I'm positive it isn't appendicitis," I said. "But perhaps

you could bring me a glass of water and a couple of aspirin?"

The deputy found some aspirin in the desk drawer and drew a paper cup of water from the water cooler.

He put the cup and the aspirin on the end of a narrow board and shoved it through the bars toward me.

"I'm not allowed to go in there," he explained. "Especially when I'm alone. You can never tell what might happen."

I swallowed the aspirin, drank the water, and lay down again.

In the next cell, Fred chuckled. "Nice try."

I turned on him indignantly. "I don't know what you're talking about. I get this stitch in my side during moments of stress." After a while, I dozed off.

The ring of the telephone woke me. The deputy reached for the phone and listened. Finally he hung up and smiled in our direction. "That was the sheriff calling from Phoenix. Seems as soon as he got there he found out that the real Hannibal Coggins was just picked up in Stafford. I guess we owe you two an apology."

He rose, got the ring of keys, and released both Fred and me.

I was a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Fred, but I could have sworn you were Coggins."

Fred nodded. "I felt exactly

the same way about you." He sighed. "Well, I guess I'll get my gas can filled."

The deputy consulted his watch. "It's eight thirty. Bud's Garage stays open until nine."

Fred and I went back to my car, still parked at the cafe, and he picked up his gas can. "Maybe I can get somebody at Bud's Garage to drive me back to my car."

I felt that possibly I owed Fred something. "I'll drive you back. I really don't have anything important to do at this time of the night anyway."

We got gas at Bud's Garage and then headed back in the direction we had come. It was a rather beautiful night, with a full moon and a clear sky.

I drove nearly ten miles before Fred directed me to turn off onto an ungraveled side road. I had to slow down considerably to negotiate the rough surface.

"There's one thing I don't understand, Fred," I said. "If you aren't Hannibal Coggins, why did you try to bribe your way out of jail? Wouldn't it have been simpler—and cheaper—just to wait until the sheriff proved that you weren't Coggins?"

Fred sighed. "I was afraid you'd think of that. And if you work on it a little more, you'll probably come up with the answer." He pressed open the glove

compartment of my car and began rummaging around.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, "but almost anything will do." He found a screwdriver. "If the sheriff had processed my fingerprints in Phoenix, he would have discovered that Hannibal Coggins isn't the only person in the world who's wanted by the police." He regarded me severely. "Ever been stabbed by a screwdriver?"

"No," I said uneasily. "I can't say that I have." I experienced the familiar tension stitch in my side and winced.

"Relax," Fred said. "Killing isn't my trade. That's why I went through the trouble of turning in what I thought was Hannibal Coggins. I thought that way I might be saving some innocent people's lives."

I felt a certain amount of relief.

He hefted the screwdriver again. "Just the same, remember that this weapon puts me in charge of the situation."

Some two hundred yards ahead of us I could make out the shadowy bulk of a car parked slightly to one side of the narrow road.

Fred gave an order. "Stop the car right here."

I put my foot on the brake. The car swerved to the right as

we came to an abrupt stop and Fred fell over me.

He quickly untangled himself. "Now, watch that! You could have gotten yourself killed if it were anybody else but me."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but the car swerves when I step on the brakes. I think one of the front tires is soft."

Fred took my car keys out of the ignition and pocketed them. "I'll leave the keys in the road when I leave. Now just sit right there and don't move until I'm gone."

Obviously Fred didn't want me to get close enough to his car to copy the license number.

He picked up the road map on the seat next to me and pocketed that too. "I wouldn't want to get lost again." He opened the car door and left with the two gallon can of gasoline, glancing back occasionally as he made his way to the shadows of his car. After a while his lights went on and the car pulled away.

I watched the taillights diminish in the distance and then got out of my car and walked down the road.

In the bright moonlight I had no trouble finding my car keys where Fred had said they would be.

I looked once more at the fading taillights and then made my way back to the car.

Poor Fred, I thought, he's heading for Nelson's Butte.

With the two gallons in his tank, he should be able to get there and a little beyond—or a little back—depending on his decision. That was all, however.

On the map there is an asterisk next to Nelson's Butte. Yet so many people, it seems, cannot find the footnotes on a map, and evidently Fred was one of them. Nelson's Butte is a ghost town and not a soul has lived there in over seventy years. Fred wouldn't find any gas stations there, and the nearest live town was more than forty miles farther on.

I started my car, carefully negotiated a turn, and drove back to the highway.

If I'd been an honest citizen, I would have driven back to Everettville and told the deputy approximately where he could pick up Fred.

However, I wasn't an honest citizen.

I, too, have my trade and I ply it well. When I had stepped on the brakes at Fred's order, I had turned the steering wheel slightly so that he would fall against me.

Now I patted the side pocket in which I had Fred's wallet. It contained at least five hundred dollars.

Not bad for one night's work.

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